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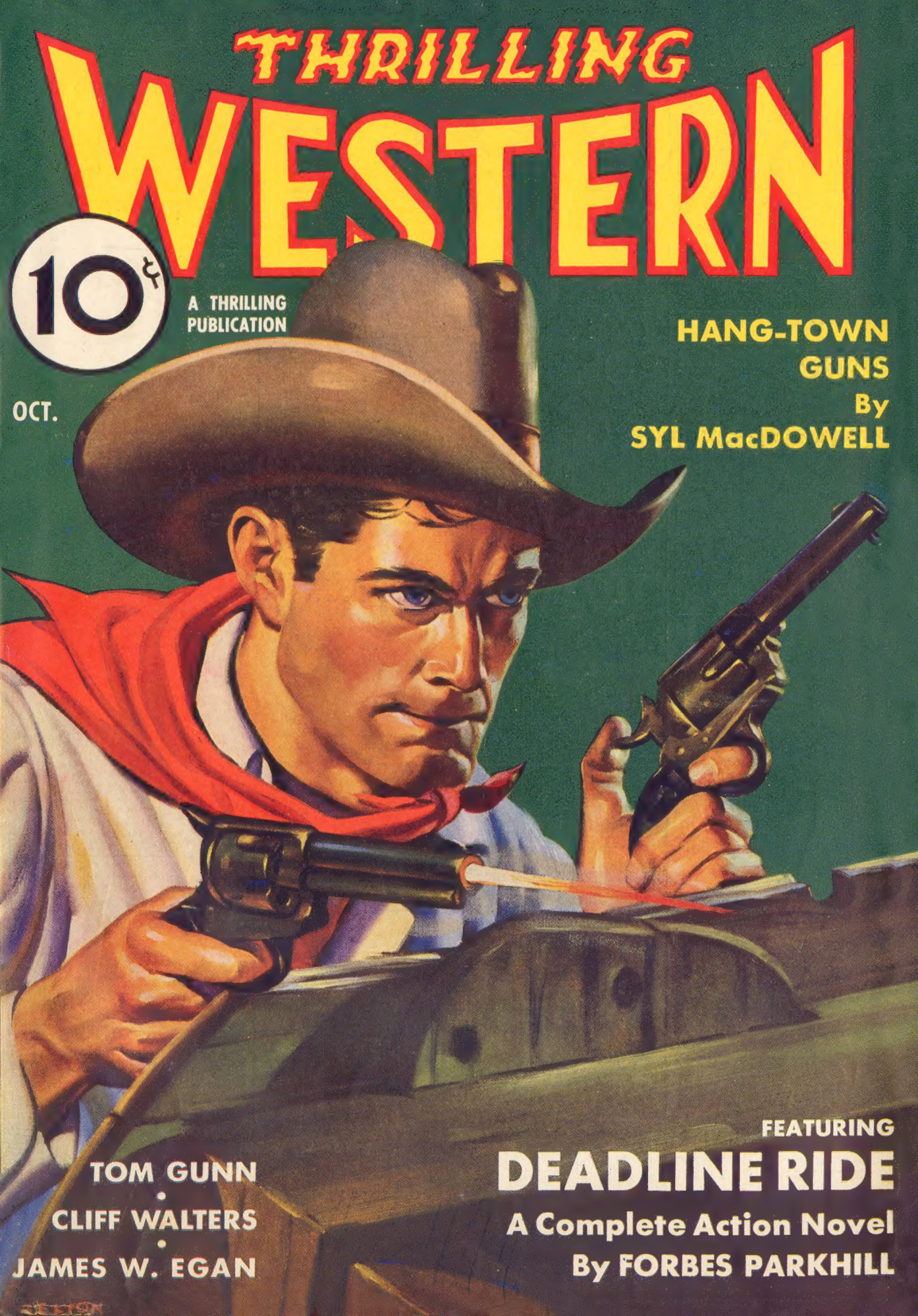

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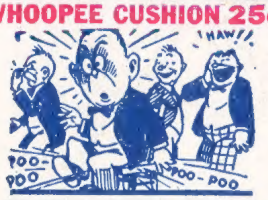

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Now another change is taking place. An old established industry —an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better —more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Georgia man made $802.50 his first two weeks. A Connecticut man writes he has made $55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses —men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

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Some of the Savings You Can Show

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Vol. VII, No. 1 | G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* | October, 1935

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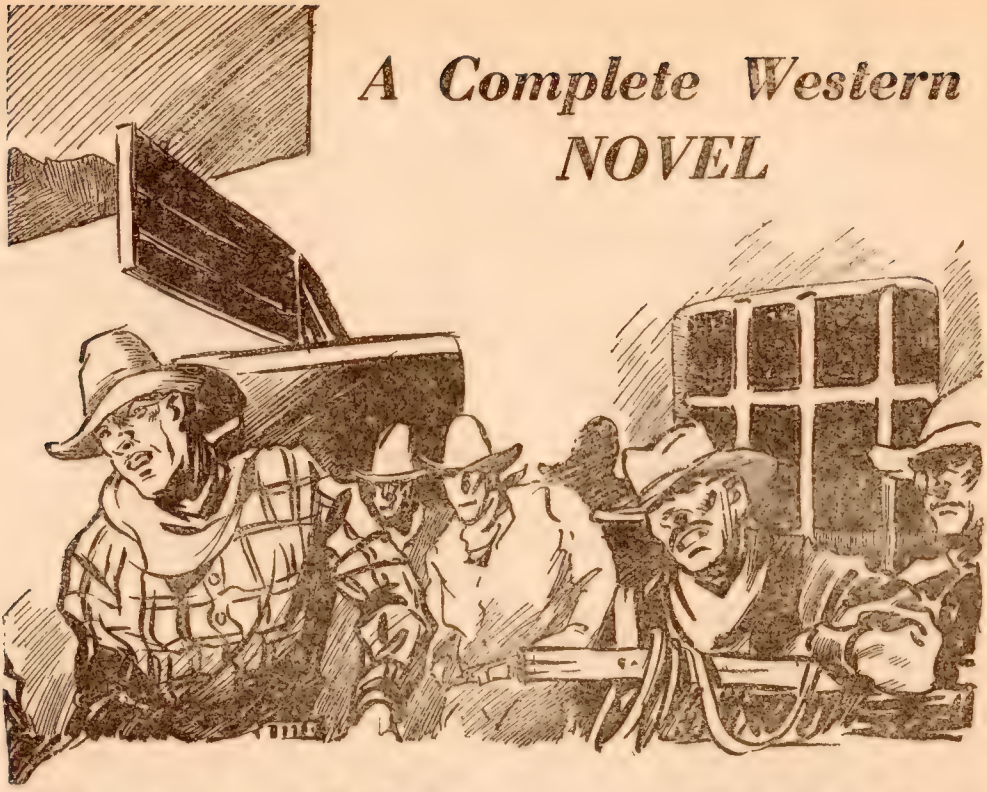


Deadline Ride

When His Pal Faces a Necktie Party, Ken McGee Does Trigger Duty—Gunning it Out with a Crew of Sidewinders and Wading Through Quicksand to Keep a Solemn Promise!

By FORBES PARKHILL

Author of "Blazing Guns," "Battling Buckaroo," etc.

CHAPTER I

Battle Pals

ANXIETY furrowed the bronzed brow of stocky "Keno" Ed McGee as he loped down the dusty main street of the Arizona cow town of Mimbres. He squinted uneasily at the declining afternoon sun as he reined in his trail-weary palomino gelding at the hitch-rail in front of the swinging doors of the Two Republics.

As Keno swung from the saddle, the whooping figure of a slim, blond youth rigged out in range garb reeled from the adobe liquidorium and came to an abrupt halt in front of the rail.

"Keno Ed McGee!" the youth

Keno McGee

cried hoarsely as his pale blue eyes focused on the chunky, sandy-haired newcomer. "Why, yuh ugly, bat-eared so-and-so! Yuh dirty, blinkety-blanked cross between a desert rat and a quart of Taos lightning! Looky here, fella—yuh got here just in time to help me commit a massacre!"

Keno hitched up his chaps and grinned a crooked, engaging grin. Nobody but a mother could love that ugly mug of Keno's, with its bashed-in nose and jutting jaw—until he smiled that off-center, winning smile. It lighted up his homely mug as moonlight softens the rugged contours of the Grand Canyon.

"Goshamighty," he exclaimed as he recognized the pal whom he hadn't seen for two years. "If it ain't Whitey hisself! Whitey, the best friend a bartender ever had! Whitey Bushrod, yuh daggoned hoss thief, how d'yuh ever manage to keep outa jail?"

Whitey, swaying slightly, wiped his lips with the back of his hand. His hide was the delicate blond type that never tans, but is continually peeling; and now it was redder than ever. Keno, who was well aware of his former pal's greatest weakness, knew what made Whitey's face temporarily so beet-red that his white brows and lashes seemed weird in contrast.

"Looky here, fella," Whitey grinned joyfully as he reached for the newcomer's hand and wrung it with enthusiasm. "Me and yuh, we're all set to commit some right swell murders, Keno! To be exact, two gaudy, gory, horrible, satisfyin' killin's! C'mon inside, fella, an' h'ist a couple while I unfold the plot."

Two or three loafers, squatting in the shade of the *cantina*, looked up and laughed. Keno patted the swaying Whitey on the shoulder.

"Reckon we'll have to put it off till some other time, *compadre*. Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane! Don't yuh remember that I ain't very good at massacrees? Now, if 'twas a mere matter of robbin' a bank for a pal, or stickin' up a train, or some little thing like—"

"Yuh think I'm foolin'," interrupted Whitey, scowling fiercely. "I ain't. I've took a vow, broad fella. To kill on sight two o' the crookedest jaspers ever fooled folks by walkin' on their hind laigs—Peg Aspenell and Grovont Gallatin.

"They come here to the Mimbres country after you left, Keno. They're contestin' my homestead entry, hopin' to grab my little ranch so's they'll control the pass to the Border used by all the rustlers. I've stood all I'm goin' tuh from them two rapscallions, an' now I'm goin' to take my forty-five an'—"

"SHO', now," interrupted Keno soothingly, winking at the loungers. "Now wouldn't yuh do an old pal a favor an' postpone all this slaughter till tomorrer? Goshamighty, Whitey, I'd admire a heap to join up with yuh in all this bloodshed. But I got something gosh-awful important to do meanwhile. So let's jest postpone our murderous impulses till later on. What say, pal?"

"What yuh got to do that's so all-fired important?" demanded Whitey suspiciously.

The lopsided grin faded from Keno's homely face. "My mother, Whitey. I've come back to see her. I got word she was doin' right porely, and mightn't live long. I got

to get back to the old home ranch right away, to see her before—before—"

"I see," said Whitey soberly. "Yeah, I savvy how it is, broad fella. Oh, well—yuh'll be hereabouts for a spell, I reckon?"

Before the stocky Keno could answer, a figure emerged from the nearby livery barn and turned toward them. Keno noted that he was a man of middle age, inclined to stoutness, and that he walked with a limp. He had never seen him before, so he scarce gave him a second glance until Whitey suddenly burst out:

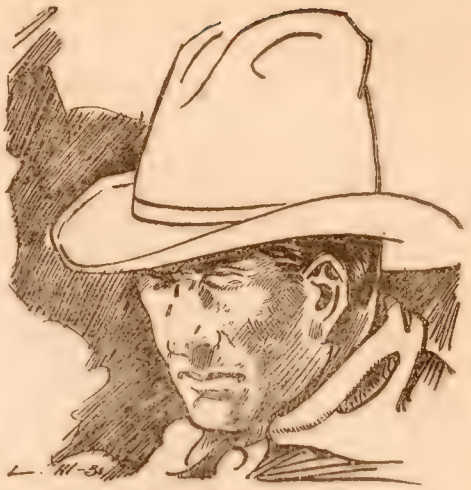
"Peg Aspenell! I've been looking for yuh all afternoon, yuh ring-tailed polecat! Yuh crooked, thieving, cowardly coyote—now I've got yuh where I want yuh!"

WHITEY'S words cut like the lash of a quirt. He had cussed Keno a few moments before, upon seeing him for the first time in two years. But it was the goodnatured cussing one reserves for his closest friends. There was nothing goodnatured about the profane rawhiding he was handing out to Peg Aspenell, one of the two ranchmen he had sworn to kill. Keno saw the fellow go white with rage.

"Get out of my way, yuh bum!" he snarled, edging away in an effort to pass between Whitey and the hitch-rail. "Git—or I'll have yuh thrown in jail, yuh drunk!"

"Yeah?" Whitey pointed a trembling forefinger at the ranchman. "Looky here, Peg Aspenell—you and yore pardner, Grovont, may own the courts of Mimbres County. But yuh don't own the sheriff! Mebbe yuh kin go to law and swoggle me outa my homestead; mebbe yore Cartwheel gang of rustlers can steal me deef and blind! Mebbe yuh think yuh can run me outa the country and turn Mimbres into a rustlers' roost!

"Yuh're full of crooked tricks, Peg. But there's none of 'em kin stop a bullet. Yeah, that's what I said—a bullet! I've been layin' for



Grovont Gallatin

yuh, Peg—layin' for yuh and fer yore sidewinder pardner, Grovont! Here's where old Judge Colt renders a verdict in favor of the underdog, for oncet! Draw yore gun, yuh polecat!"

Keno didn't know what it was all about. He was inclined to side with his pal, right or wrong. But he wanted to know more before he horned in on a situation that had all the makings of a first-rate, fatal gun fuss. From his knowledge of Whitey, he doubted if his pal would be so belligerently bloodthirsty after he had sobered up.

But it looked as if Whitey had talked himself into trouble, and plenty of it. Keno could see that Peg was not the kind to tuck his tail and run like a coyote merely on account of a bit of bullyragging. Whatever his other faults might be, it was plain that he was no coward. And now he was enraged almost beyond endurance by Whitey's torrent of abuse.

"I don't take that kind of talk from any man, drunk or sober," Aspenell said between clenched teeth. "But I'm going to give yuh a chance to take it back."

"Take it back?" Whitey was sputtering with rage. "Take it back? Why, yuh measly woodtick, me and my pal are honing for a chance to learn yuh that yuh can't deal a man

out of his rights, and get away with it! If yuh don't like my talk—why, yuh got a gun!"

Keno sensed that Whitey was deliberately attempting to taunt Peg into making the first play for his Colt. Whitey was striving to build himself an out on the ground of self-defense. Keno likewise knew his pal was no slouch with a six-gun; a

"Hug the moon, Keno!"

better-than-middling shot, when he was sober. But now he was far from sober.

Keno didn't know Peg's ability as a .45 wrangler. If the ranchman possessed any skill at all, Whitey's plan might easily backfire on him. Keno didn't crave to see his pal's carcass dragged away by the heels.

With an angry growl, Peg Aspenell reached for his gun. Keno saw the waiting Whitey take his cue with a lightning-swift play for his own weapon.

Instantly the dusty street was resounding with the crash of gunfire. Peg spun backward, clawing at the air. He crashed to the ground as the street still echoed to the sound of the shots.

An instant of utter silence. Heads poked cautiously around corners and from doorways. Another moment, and a score of men were running toward the scene of the shooting.

Keno stood crouching, his smoking .45 still in his fingers. His left hand gripped the wrist of his pal, holding Whitey's gun pointing earthward just beyond the lip of its holster.

Peg rolled over and scrambled to his feet. His expression betrayed a mixture of chagrin and bewilderment. His right hand was groping alongside his hip.

But his holstered gun was there no longer. Three slugs from Keno's persuader had shot it away—gun, holster, and all—and the impact was what had spun the ranchman about, to crash to the ground. Whitey had not fired a shot. Nor had his foe. Keno had stolen the show.

Whitey seemed as bewildered as Peg. Keno had grabbed his wrist at the instant he started to draw. Now Keno, grinning his lopsided grin, silently holstered his own weapon and released his grip on Whitey. He knew Whitey wouldn't use his gun on Peg, now that the latter was disarmed.

SUDDENLY a lean, dark man, conspicuous because of his longhorn mustache and the nickel badge on his vest, came pushing through the crowd behind Whitey. The blond youth had turned on his chunky pal and was handing him hell on a platter.

"Yuh blanked, sawed-off slab of side meat!" he cried angrily. "What d'yuh mean by cheating me outa my killin'? A swell pal *you* turned out to be!" Abruptly he whirled on Peg. "Pick up yore cannon, tough fella, and let's shoot this thing out!"

But Peg could see the officer approaching behind Whitey. He smiled a sickly smile, but said nothing. He stood looking at his empty hands, as if unable to decide what to do with them.

"Okay, yuh pup!" exploded Whitey contemptuously. "But I'm serving

notice on yuh that we'll fight this out the next time we meet! Remember, Peg—the next time yuh see me yuh better draw, and draw fast, 'cause I aim to shoot yuh down like a skunk!"

Sheriff Amos Trott clapped his hand on Whitey's shoulder and said:

"Oh, yeah, lemme see—mebbe *I'll* have something to say about that!"

As the startled Whitey turned to face the officer, another newcomer edged his way to the forefront of the gaping crowd. It was Grovont Gallatin, partner of Peg in the ownership of the Cartwheel ranch. Grovont's shaggy black brows knitted in a perpetual scowl.

Keno broke the tension by breaking into a hearty laugh. The crowd joined in. Sheriff Amos Trott glanced suspiciously at the stubby cowhand with the bashed nose and bulldog jaw. Suddenly the light of recognition gleamed in his bleak eyes.

"Well, if it ain't Keno Ed McGee, come back to his old stomping grounds after two years! The son of my old friend, Honest John McGee, the squarest cuss that ever forked a hoss! Son, I hate to heave this pie-eyed pal of yore'n into jail, but—"

"He'll be all right, Sheriff, soon as he sobers up," Keno interrupted hastily.

"Parole him to me, and I'll look after him and see that he keeps outa trouble. Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane, he's only—"

"Sheriff!" put in Peg Aspenell angrily. "I demand that yuh jail both these jaspers! Everybody heard Whitey threaten that he and his stubby friend were going to murder me and my pardner, Grovont! I'll file charges against this Keno gent, of assault with intent to kill. He tried to murder me, an' if his shots hadn't gone wild—"

Sheriff Amos Trott held up a silencing hand.

"Peg, you and yore pardner, Grovont, have been in this Mimbres country something short of two years. So yuh couldn't be expected to know that when this Keno lad shoots, his bullets don't go wild."

For the first time Peg's partner spoke up:

"The question is, Sheriff, are yuh going to jail these birds, or ain't yuh?"

"I'll tell yuh," snapped the officer. "I'll turn Whitey over to Keno's care. When he sobers up he won't be half so carnivorous. And I'll give Peg until tomorrow to cool down. If he still wants to file charges then, it's okay with me."

"What's the big idea, Sheriff?"

"Sheriff," said Grovont ominously, peering at Trott from beneath his shaggy brows, "yuh don't realize what yuh're doin' by lettin' them two killers go free. Man, yuh're conniving at murder!"

CHAPTER II

Jinx Wrangler

KENO'S father had been one of the first settlers in the Mimbres country, and had served as county commissioner. He had built up a sizeable cow outfit, despite the ravages of Border raiders. A verbal agreement to back a friend financially in an extensive cattle deal had back-

fired on him when a drouth had wiped out the friend's herds. McGee, although under no legal obligation to do so, had sold most of his assets to make good his pledge, thereby almost bankrupting himself and winning the name of "Honest John" and a reputation for unshakable integrity.

Keno's mother, upon the death of Honest John, had sold the remaining ranch property to a cousin, on condition that she be permitted to spend her declining years in the home, where she had lived so many years with her stalwart and upright mate. Knowing she was in good hands, Keno had drifted westward to the Cuyamaca range in California, lured by the call of excitement and adventure.

WHITEY had been one of the riders on the old McGee ranch. He'd have accompanied his pal, had it not been that he had recently bought a homestead relinquishment in the barren Dos Hermanos hills between Mimbres and the Border, and set up a one-horse outfit of his own.

Despite his weakness for overmuch crooking of the elbow, Whitey had prospered moderately as a ranchman in his own right, up to the time of his clash with Peg and Grovont, partners who had bought the nearby Cartwheel ranch. When he had refused to sell for a song, they had brought action in the courts challenging his title; and, when Keno returned, Whitey was faced with the prospects of possible dispossess.

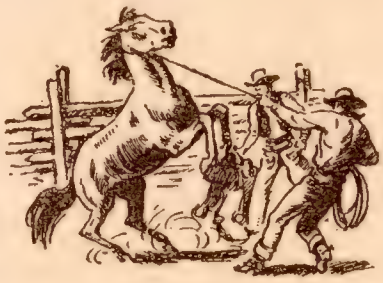
Now that Sheriff Amos Trott had settled the ruckus, Keno hooked an arm through Whitey's elbow and started to draw him away. The clash had sobered Whitey considerably.

"Looky here, broad fella," he argued solemnly. "Peg's got to be first to leave. If I leave now, it'll look like he's runnin' me out."

"Well, ain't his pardner leading him away?" returned Keno. "Goshamighty, but they're a tough-looking pair. I wouldn't exactly choose 'em to teach a Sunday school class."

"Peg is brother to Grovont's wife," explained Whitey, scowling. "They're brothers-in-law. I reckon Grovont's wuss'n Peg, if such a thing's possible. Treacherouser, I mean. But now, with you to do the shootin', I'll soon kill 'em both."

"If yuh don't hobble yore tongue, somebody's liable to take yuh serious," said Keno, hitching up his chaps. "Climb onto yore hoss, and get started back to yore homestead, and I'll ride with yuh as far as the forks of the trail. Tomorrow yuh



can ride over to the old McGee place and we'll hold us a reunion."

"Tomorrow? The best time to reune is right now, stout fella. Let's paint Mimbres a gory red, and slaughter the whole Cartwheel outfit."

Keno gently hazed his friend away from the inviting swinging doors of the Two Republics.

"Sorry, Whitey. I got to hurry out to the ranch and see the mom. I been ridin' powerful hard, and I'm nigh all in, not to speak of my hoss, which has had tough going over the *malpais*. I figgered I could save time by headin' straight acrost country from the Cuyamaca country, because 'twould of took me a day to reach the railroad, and then there's only one passenger train a day through Mimbres."

"Don't worry about yore mom, *compadre*," said Whitey. "I come past the old McGee place this mornin', and I seen her outside, putterin' around with her chickens and her garden."

Keno hesitated. He drew forth his nickel-plated watch by its thong of whang leather, and then exclaimed:

"Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane! I fig-

gered to reach the ranch before dark, and here its four o'clock already! I'll never—"

"Four?" grinned Whitey. "It's five, yuh idjit. When yuh come from Cuyamaca to Mimbres, yuh come from Pacific time to Mountain time, and forgot to change yore watch, I reckon. So it's too late to ride to the ranch tonight."

Keno frowned. "Nope. I figgered to get there tonight, pal."

"Well," shrugged Whitey, "then I'll be seein' yuh tomorrow. I come to town because my best cutting hoss got a calk caught in a crack in the rock and twisted off one end of a shoe. I dassn't ride him thataway on this lava rock very much, or I'll lame him. Blacksmith has two jobs ahead of mine, so I won't be ready to leave for coupla hours. So I reckon I'll make a night of it, and ride out and visit yuh tomorrow."

Keno had counted on reaching the old home ranch by nightfall. But he had promised Sheriff Trott to be responsible for Whitey, and to keep him out of trouble. He couldn't do both.

After all, he asked himself, what difference did a few hours make? Little or none, now that he knew his mother was in no immediate danger. He reckoned he'd better be Whitey's nursemaid for a few hours, for the daggoned likeable idiot would be sure to bog himself down in trouble if someone didn't guardian him.

He knew Whitey to be the kind of gent that would give you his shirt, if he thought you needed it. Trouble was, if he didn't happen to possess a shirt to give you, he wouldn't hesitate to go out and swipe someone else's to give to you. A swell friend, but not burdened with a very loud-mouthed conscience.

"I reckon I'll stick around till yuh get yore hoss shod, Whitey. Then me and yuh'll ride together as far as the forks of the trail. I don't dast let yuh run loose."

Whitey drew up with an air of offended dignity.

"Don't let that worry yuh, yuh ox. I promise yuh I won't destroy either of them warts on the face of creation. Leastways, not until tomorrow. Now, are yuh satisfied?"

Keno was middling well satisfied. Whitey accompanied him when he took his horse to the livery barn. He thought Whitey was approaching the stage where he'd be ready to sleep it off. So he suggested they both take a nap in the hay mow.

BUT it was the trail-weary Keno who closed his eyes first. When he awakened, it was almost dark, and Whitey was missing. Where he had been lay an empty bottle. Keno knew Whitey had deserted him for another pal—Kid Barleycorn.

Keno leaped to his feet with a guilty feeling of apprehension. A sober Whitey could be trusted to keep his pledge to dodge trouble. But Whitey filled with Taos lightning was capable of anything. Pals, promises, everything might and probably would be forgotten—everything except that overwhelming urge to kill the men who were swindling him.

Keno felt he had betrayed his trust. He had promised Sheriff Trott to keep Whitey out of trouble. And he had literally gone asleep on the job!

He hurried to the blacksmith shop.

"Whitey?" repeated the smith with a shrug. "Shure, I seen him. He rolled in quite a spell ago and got his hoss. Said he couldn't wait. Said there was something important he had to do. Said he'd bring the hoss back to be shod after he'd done it."

Keno experienced a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Was he—uh—was he normal?" he asked.

"Yeah," nodded the smith. "Pretty drunk."

"Which way did he go?" Keno demanded eagerly.

"Search me. I misdoubt if he could tell one way from another."

Keno cursed himself fluently as he hurried to the Two Republics. He was told Whitey hadn't been seen since the fracas with Peg. Now he was certain his pal had departed

from Mimbres, for otherwise he certainly would have appeared at the Hennessy shop.

"Where 'bout at is this Peg Aspenell gent?" he asked the barkeep, striving to make his inquiry appear to be merely casual. "I want to see him about—well, about a hoss."

The gin-jerker eyed him coldly and suspiciously.

"No use trying to stir up any more trouble," he observed. "Peg and his pardner left town together a long time back."

Peg and his partner had left Mimbres. Whitey had left Mimbres. What did it mean? Merely that all were going home? Or that the inflamed Whitey was once more on the trail of his deadly enemies, his promise to Keno forgotten?

"I hate to think what would happen if he'd tangle with both of them gents at the same time, and him full of joy-juice!" thought Keno as he sped back to the livery barn. "Gosh-amighty-Mabel-Jane! They'd fill him as full of holes as a hunk of cheese! And be perfectly justified, in view of the public threats he made to get 'em. When he's tight, Whitey couldn't hit a mountain even if he was shootin' down a mine shaft! And if anything happens to him, it'll be my fault, daggone my hide!"

A FEW minutes later he swung into the saddle of his palomino, which was somewhat refreshed by the rest and feeding of grain. He was on familiar ground as he headed south toward the low, barren cactus-clad Dos Hermanos hills.

The trail led back toward his old home, where he had spent his boyhood years.

For several miles the trail paralleled the railroad tracks. But the tracks finally veered aside in a huge sweep which took them around the western end of the Dos Hermanos range before they reached the town of Cristobal and straightened out along the Mexican Border.

The moon had not yet risen. Once Keno dismounted and examined the trail carefully by the light of a match. He became more and more uneasy when he failed to find the print of the broken shoe he knew was worn by Whitey's horse. But there were many hoofprints on the trail that might have been made since Whitey's departure, blotting out the marks sought by Keno.

He didn't leave the saddle again until he reached the forks of the trail.

There a fork led to the Cartwheel ranch; one to the old McGee place, and one to Whitey's homestead. Here Keno, on hands and knees, burned a dozen matches before he finally picked up the mark of the twisted calk.

To his consternation, the prints led, not toward the homestead, but toward the ranch of Peg Aspenell and Grovont Gallatin.

Keno groaned as he sprang to the side of his horse. For the prints indicated that his pal had been striving to overtake the two ranchmen.

As he thrust his left foot in the nigh stirrup and clutched the horn, preparatory to swinging into the saddle, something hard was jammed into his ribs. Simultaneously he heard a sharp voice:

"Hug the man in the moon, son, less'n yuh crave to find yoreself goin' 'round with yore innards blowed out!'

Keno was caught off balance, with one foot in the stirrup and both hands in use. Before he could have drawn his six-gun, his assailant could have blown him to hellandgone. He was caught short.

He had no choice but to raise his hands aloft in an attempt to "hug the man in the moon."

He recognized the voice of the man who had suddenly stepped from behind a mesquite clump. It was Sheriff Amos Trott.

"What's the big idea, Sheriff?" he asked without looking over his shoulder. He was trying his best to appear nonchalant.

"Sho', now," drawled the lawman. "Yuh ain't goin' to try to stall, are yuh?"

"Goshamighty - Mabel - Jane!" ex-

ploded Keno with sudden irritation. "Yuh figger I'm a mind reader, or somethin'? Whatsamatter?"

"Nothin' much," drawled Sheriff Trott as he lifted the six-gun from Keno's holster. "But I'm powerful sorry to find the son of my old friend, Honest John McGee, mixed up in such an affair."

"I don't savvy what yuh're blowin' off about," snorted Keno, with some irritation.

"Of course," said the officer with elaborate sarcasm, "*you* wouldn't know that Peg Aspenell has been murdered, would you? Dry-gulched. Shot in the back!"

CHAPTER III

Shackles of the Law

HIS heart leaped into his mouth. He almost groaned aloud as the sheriff's words had confirmed his worst fears.

"How—how did it happen, Sheriff?" he gasped.

"That's what I expect *you* to tell *me*," replied Trott grimly. "Yuh two are pals. I reckon the both of yuh was in on the deal. Anyway, I'm arrestin' yuh as an accessory."

"Arresting *me?* For helpin' to—"

Keno broke off suddenly. He didn't want to say anything that would hurt Whitey's chances. He didn't want to be in the position of trying to square himself by heaping blame on his pal. Hands still upraised, he was looking back over his shoulder. Now Sheriff Trott backed away and permitted Keno to turn about.

"Didn't yuh help him?" the sheriff shot at him suddenly, his drawl forgotten.

Keno was in a tough spot. Almost anything he said in his own defense would hurt Whitey's case. He resolved to keep his tongue snubbed up close with a tight rope.

"Where is Whitey now?" he countered.

"On his way back to Mimbres in charge of my deppity. Mebbe they've had time to reach the jail. Yuh'll be with him, within an hour. I hate to lock up the son of my old friend. But unless yuh prove yuh didn't have anythin' to do with the murder, I'm shore as 'ell goin' to do it!"

"Goshamighty, Sheriff!" exclaimed Keno, forcing a grin. "Yuh know Whitey well enough to savvy he ain't any great shakes with a gun, even when he's sober. On a dark night like this, and him in a condition to be seeing double, anyways, does it stand to reason he could shoot straight enough to kill Peg?"

"Nope," admitted the sheriff, "it don't. And that's exactly why I suspicion *you*, Keno. This afternoon Whitey was soundin' off to the effect that him and you was going to get Peg and Grovont. Not him alone mind. But him *and you!* I figger that he talked yuh into helpin' him satisfy his grudge. Yuh're like yore dad, son, in that yuh'd go a long ways to help a friend. Far as I know, yuh never had any grudge of yore own against Peg or Grovont. It must of been to help Whitey that yuh done it."

Keno had a pretty good explanation ready, but it would have put Whitey on the spot. So instead of making a denial, he sought to learn more details of the shooting."

"So yuh think me and Whitey rode out to the Cartwheel ranch and, in full view of a dozen of their cowhands, called Peg out and killed him, huh?"

His words had the desired effect.

"Yuh know daggone well it didn't happen at the ranch," scowled the sheriff. "The dry-gulchers lay in ambush where the trail passes through the Narrows. Just after Peg and Grovont passed on their way back to the ranch, somebody started shooting from behind the Rabbit Ear rock. They missed Grovont, but dropped Peg, dead as a butchered steer.

"Then Grovont opened up on the dry-gulchers. He drove 'em back and made 'em scatter, and chased one of 'em in the direction of Mimbres before he turned back to see if Peg was still alive. He says there was

two of 'em. How d'yuh get around that?"

Keno shrugged. "Mebbe there *was* two of 'em." But he felt Grovont had lied in an attempt to involve him in the shooting. He was positive Whitey would never have thrown in with someone else. "So yuh nabbed Whitey when he got back to town, eh?"

"We found him between here and the Narrows. His hoss had throwed him, and he was knocked cold. He never even tried to deny it, when he come to. He moaned somethin' about bein' sorry to get yuh in trouble—which *proves* yuh're the other ambusher! Now, son, don't yuh figger yuh better come clean and tell everythin'?"

Keno thought he knew well enough why Whitey had moaned his regret at getting his pal in trouble; because, as his brain cleared, he had remembered his promise, and Keno's promise to the sheriff.

"It's my fault, Sheriff," he confessed. "I promised to keep him outa trouble if yuh paroled him to me, and I didn't do it. I feel awful about it."

"Uh-huh. I should think yuh would. Son, yore dad would turn over in his grave if he knew what yuh done. Not because yuh killed a man; but because yuh shot him from behind, in the dark, without givin' him a chance."

Keno felt the blood rushing to his face. He wanted to shout out that he was guiltless. But that would be the equivalent of knotting the noose more tightly about the neck of his pal. Honest John McGee never would have betrayed a friend. Keno could do no less.

"Well," continued the officer when Keno made no answer, "I reckon we better be headin' for town—and jail. I figured to pick yuh up somewhere hereabouts. I'll slip a handcuff on yore left wrist, and lock it to a riggin' ring on yore saddle. I never thought the day would come when I'd be putting Honest John McGee's boy in jail for murder, and heading him for the gallows."

"Wait a second," pleaded Keno. "How long yuh aim to keep me in jail?"

It was the sheriff's turn to shrug. "I don't see how it's possible for yuh ever to get out, son, less'n it's when you and Whitey are hanged. Mebbe the jury will sentence yuh to life instead of death. Of course, there's always the outside chance of acquittal."

"How about givin' bond, Sheriff?"

"Murder ain't a bailable offense in this State, son. There ain't a way on earth that yuh can get out before yore trial."

"I see," muttered Keno slowly. "That's sorta tough. Yuh see, I got word that my mom was sorta ailin', and I rode all the way back here from Cuyamaca to see her before—before she—aw, hell, Sheriff! Don't yuh see how it is? I can't go to jail without seein' her! Goshamighty, man! It probably means I'll never see her again!"

"Sorry," remarked the officer. "Yuh should of thought of that sooner."

"LISTEN, Sheriff," spoke up Keno. "Why can't yuh let me run over to the old ranch and say good—I mean, visit with her a while? I promise yuh I'll ride into town tomorrow and give myself up."

Sheriff Trott laughed shortly.

"Do I look like I'm crazy?—If 'twas Honest John McGee, I'd agree in a second. Because Honest John wouldn't of broke his word, come hell or high water, even if it meant he was givin' hisself up to be hanged. But *you* ain't got the stuff in yuh that yore father had!"

Keno flushed hotly. "But I promise—"

"Promise? Like the promise yuh gave me this afternoon, that was broken almost as soon as it was made? No, son, I can take no such promises. It's up to me to see that yuh're safe in jail for the preliminary hearing. Yuh can take yore left hand down. No, hold it out so's I can snap the bracelet on it."

Keno's homely face was a picture of consternation. He was confident

The sheriff's six-gun roared at almost the instant Keno's hand swept the weapon aside

that ultimately he could establish his innocence. But what if he had to lie in jail for weeks, awaiting trial? What about his mother? He might never lay eyes on her again. She might die believing her son the vilest sort of murderer.

He held forth his left hand. Sheriff Trott, still keeping the revolver trained upon him, extended the handcuffs in his free hand. But before he could snap the cuff on Keno's wrist, the latter struck with the swiftness of a rattlesnake.

The sheriff's six-gun roared at almost the instant Keno's hand swept the weapon aside. But the cowhand was almost deafened by the detonation so close to his ear. The lancing flame from the muzzle almost blinded him. Burning grains of powder buried themselves in his cheek and stung excruciatingly.

Simultaneously, the chunky Keno swung at the sheriff's jaw. Trott jerked backward. The wallop failed to catch him squarely, but the glancing blow sent him staggering backward a step or two.

Instantly Keno rushed in. His very life depended upon keeping at close quarters, so he could prevent the sheriff from using his gun. The fingers of his left hand closed about Trott's gun wrist. He twisted the weapon aside, even as it roared out

again. But this time the bullet went whining away into the sky.

Sheriff Trott was many years older than Keno. But he was tough and wiry, with muscles like whang leather. His bony knuckles crashed into Keno's face and snapped his head backward.

Keno braced his stocky legs and pushed forward like a charging bull. The taller man was forced to give ground. Keno drove in a smashing sledgehammer blow to Trott's short ribs. The impact knocked a gasping grunt of pain from the officer.

He was still gripping Trott's gun wrist. He dared not risk letting the sheriff twist the weapon about. At all costs he must keep that .45 turned away until he could wrest it from his foe.

As he charged in again, an odd thought flashed through Keno's mind. As a child he had known Trott, then a deputy. But he had regarded his father's friend with an awe that he had never quite outgrown. And here he was, battling furiously with the man who had always represented the majesty of the law. Battling on even terms, or better, and utterly confident he would emerge victorious.

But his awe of Sheriff Trott failed to make him pull his punches. He hated to wallop the man who had been a friend of his father. But too much depended on this battle.

Keno let drive with another mighty smash, aimed at the sheriff's middle. Trott twisted aside violently, wrenching his gun hand down and sideward. A third time the weapon roared, close to Keno's thigh. As Keno sidestepped he felt something tug sharply at the bat wing of his slick bullhide chaps.

Then he stumbled over a mesquite root. He fell to his knees. But he retained his grip on the sheriff's wrist.

Now it was Trott's turn to charge. With his free hand he rained blows on Keno's head. Twice the chunky cowpuncher tried to struggle to his feet, only to be beaten down again by the sheriff's furious assault. Keno's palomino, ground-hitched a few yards away, had become frightened by the gunfire. Snorting with alarm, it was moving away step by frightened step, despite its trailing bridle.

Keno's free arm shot out suddenly and encircled the sheriff's legs. He heaved upward with all his might. The officer toppled over backward, crashing into a mesquite clump.

For a moment the two struggled furiously amid the clutching branches. It was Keno who was first to struggle to his feet, still keeping a steel-trap grip on the gun arm of his foe.

An instant later Trott scrambled up. Keno helped him with a terrific jerk on his gun arm. The sheriff came bouncing forward and up like a jack-in-the-box.

Simultaneously Keno uncorked a terrific right. It connected squarely with the sheriff's jaw, just as Trott was leaping toward it. Keno felt his foe wilt and go limp.

He wrenched the six-gun from feeble fingers. Then he snatched his own captured gun from Trott's belt. With one weapon in either hand he backed away, covering the sheriff, who lay in the sand at the base of the mesquite clump.

The terrific wallop would have stretched an ordinary man senseless. Sheriff Trott was dazed, but not out. Rubbing his jaw, he looked up at Keno and muttered with grudging admiration:

"Son, I got to hand it to yuh. Yuh're a fighting fool, jest like yore old man!"

CHAPTER IV

Twice Turned Tables

PANTING, Keno grinned his crooked, likeable grin.

"Goshamighty - Mabel-Jane — yuh ain't no slouch, yore own self!"

"What yuh fixin' to do now?" asked Trott, still rubbing his jaw.

Keno's grin vanished. "Yuh

wouldn't take up my proposition, Sheriff. Wouldn't trust me. Said my promise wasn't worth a plugged Mexican dollar. Said my word wasn't good, like my Dad's. Now I aim to make a liar outa yuh. An' make yuh like it."

"Huh?" grunted the sheriff, bewildered.

"I aim," went on Keno grimly, "to lug yuh off into the mesquite, away from the forks, where there's too goshamighty much traffic, and twist the chain of them handcuffs 'round a good, stout mesquite root, and then shackle 'em to yore wrists, and leave yuh chained to the ground in some out of the way spot where nobody will find yuh in a million years!"

"And then hit for the Border!" snorted Trott contemptuously.

"Nope. Yuh're wrong. And then hit for the old McGee ranch, and say howdy to my mom, like I planned. And then, when I get good and daggoned ready—mebbeso by tomorrow evening—I'll come back, and turn yuh loose, and surrender, and yuh can lug me to the Mimbres jail. In other words, I'm going to *make* yuh take up my proposition. I'm comin' back voluntary, just to show yuh my word's as good as Honest John McGee's!"

Trott seemed astounded. "Yuh gone crazy?" he demanded.

"Mebbeso," shrugged Keno. An air of simple dignity radiated from his homely mug. "I'm fixing to do what I think my pa would of done if he'd been in a jam like this."

There was a long moment of silence before the sheriff burst out:

"Danged if I don't believe yuh mean it! I'm probably just a mushy ole fool, and I reckon yuh're just aimin' to swoggle me so's yuh can hop the Border. But after all, yuh're the son of Honest John McGee. I'm goin' to take a chance. I'm goin' to take up yore proposition!"

"Proposition?" repeated Keno, puzzled. "I'm not propositionin' yuh. I'm telling yuh."

The sheriff smiled faintly. "I mean, the proposition yuh made me before yuh dehorned me of my hardware. Yuh see, I don't crave particular to lay out here and broil all day tomorrow. So what say to a deal like this:

"Turn me loose, and I'll ride back to Mimbres, and won't make any attempt to nab yuh. You go see yore mom, and have a good visit, and then come in and give yoreself up by eight o'clock tomorrow night. Meanwhile, I won't move a finger to interfere with yuh—less'n, of course, I learn yuh've doublecrossed me and are headin' for the Border, in which case all bets are off. Yuh see, I'm bankin' on yuh being a chip off'n the old block."

Keno sniffed.

"I'd be crazy to take up such a proposition, when I don't have to! D'yuh really think I oughta, after yuh turned me down flat when I made the same proposition?"

"Honest John banked on my promise many a time," shrugged the sheriff. "I don't see why his son couldn't."

"Aw, shucks!" exclaimed Keno, his lopsided grin appearing again. "Yuh know that's an argument I can't meet, don't yuh? Here, daggone it—take yore gun back. I promise yuh, on the word of the son of Honest John McGee, that I'll surrender to yuh at the Mimbres jail not later than eight o'clock tomorrow night. So long!"

SHERIFF TROTT stood staring in surprise at the weapon Keno had thrust in his hand. The cowhand had turned his back and was striding toward his palomino. The officer could have shot him, or stuck him up, without trouble.

Instead, he dropped the gun into his holster. Plainly he had hoped Keno might take up his proposal, but had never dreamed the prisoner would return his six-gun and then turn his back on him.

Without a backward glance, Keno lined out in the direction of his old home. The trail to the McGee ranch veered off sharply to the right, crossing the railroad tracks at the tank and siding less than a mile

from the familiar old 'dobe ranch buildings.

It was still early in the evening when Keno reached the ranch. He found his mother older, greyer, frailer, but apparently in no immediate danger. He talked with her until late, but carefully refrained from mentioning his predicament.

However, he explained the situation in detail to his cousin after his mother retired, and extracted a pledge that she should never be told of his trouble, in case he were tried and convicted. The cousin was astounded that Keno should even consider surrendering, and promised to provide him with a fresh horse and to accompany him to the Border.

"Thanks a heap," said Keno gravely. "But a son of Honest John McGee wouldn't break his promise. I reckon I'll be ridin' back to Mimbres in the mornin'."

"In the mornin'! Why, the deadline ain't till tomorrow night! Yuh've got all day—"

"I know," agreed Keno. "But it'll only make things tougher if I let things drag out till the last minute. I'd be leavin' now, if my hoss didn't need a rest. I'll be leavin' before sunup anyway, I reckon. Just tell her I got a hurry call to help a friend in trouble."

And despite the bewildered protest of his kinsman, Keno actually pulled out before daylight. To postpone his departure until the last minute would serve no real purpose, and might possibly jeopardize the keeping of his promise.

A southbound freight train had halted at the tank and blocked the trail. Keno dismounted, squatted on his heels alongside the right of way, and built himself a quirley as he waited. He knew it would be a matter of minutes only until the freight pulled out again.

In the dim half-light of the dawn, he failed to note two shadowy figures stealing up upon him through the mesquite and cactus. The panting of the locomotive drowned out the soft pad of their approaching footsteps.

When within fifteen feet of Keno one of them halted behind a cactus, drew his six-gun, and leveled it at the unsuspecting cowhand's skull. The other seized his companion's arm and drew it aside, pointing toward the train as if conveying the warning that the members of the train crew would hear the shot.

The first stalker nodded. Then the two crept forward again, guns in their hands in readiness to use as clubs.

Keno heard a slight noise behind him and turned idly. Instantly the two launched themselves forward, guns upraised, caution thrown to the winds.

They were almost upon him when Keno saw them. He spun about, his hand leaping to his holster with the swiftness of a striking sidewinder. But it lacked the thousandth part of a second of being swift enough.

One of the weapons crashed down, the muzzle slicing through Stetson and scalp. Keno folded, the gun falling from nerveless fingers as his knees jackknifed and he plunged forward on his face.

WHEN Keno's senses slowly began to return, the first thing that impressed itself on his consciousness was the panting of the locomotive. Against this monotonous background of sound he presently began to hear voices.

"Anybody but a dumb dogie of a sheriff would of knowed the place to find him was here at the ranch where he used to live, and where his mother lives," one harsh but hushed voice was saying. "When Trott got back to Mimbres, I says to him, I says: 'Did yuh look for him out to the old McGee place?' And he says nope, that he reckoned he was heading for the Border, and the best thing to do was to wire the deputy at Cristobal to be on the watch for him. The fool!"

The voice seeped through Keno's benumbed consciousness as if it were coming from afar. There was something familiar about it. But for the life of him Keno couldn't peg it. He

tried to open his eyes to get a look at his enemies. But his lids seemed weighted down. Try as he would he couldn't move a finger.

Some portion of his brain controling the movement of his muscles seemed to have been wholly paralyzed by the smash on his skull.

"Uh-huh. But things worked out a heap better thisaway. Now yuh can get rid of him, Grovont, or yuh can turn him over to the law."

Keno was still too nearly unconscious to start at the name of Grovont. Dully he wondered, however, what was behind the ranchman's attack upon him.

"The law?" came Grovont's snarling voice. "The law's too slow when it comes to dealin' with one of the murderers of my pardner, Peg. I aim to get rid of him, here and now."

"I reckon," said the other voice, "that first whack of yore'n almost finished him off, Grovont. He's bleeding like a punctured pig. Looks to me like he's out for keeps."

"Jest a second," said the ranchman. "I can tell."

Keno felt someone thumbing one of his eyelids back. But, oddly enough, he saw only a dim sliver of light.

"I reckon yuh're right," Grovont was saying. "His eyes are rolled back in his head. Looks like his skull is fractured, all right. That means he hasn't got a chance; will probably kick off within a few hours. Saves me putting a forty-five slug through him, the dirty dry-gulcher!"

Vainly Keno strove to rouse himself from the stupor that gripped him.

"We can leave him here, Grovont, so's it'll look like the train hit him, if yuh don't wanta risk puttin' a bullet through him."

"No-o-o," objected the ranchman hesitantly. "I got a better idea. We'll heave him into one of these empty cattle cars. They probably won't find his corpse for two or three days. And by that time the car'll be in California, or somewheres."

"Swell idea!" exclaimed Grovont's companion. "We'll take everything off'n him by which they might identify his body. Then I'll kick his face to a pulp, so's nobody could ever recognize it."

"Yeah," approved Grovont, raspingly. "Yuh might leave him near enough the door of the cattle car so's he'd slide out when the train went around a curve. If they found his carcass alongside the tracks a long ways from here, and all mashed up, they'd figure he hopped the train trying to reach the Border, and had fallen under the wheels, mebbe."

KENO heard the sound of the train whistle.

"Here—grab a holt of him, and we'll heave him into this car," Grovont said hurriedly. "Man! He looks like he's dead already, don't he? Don't know that I ever see anybody bleed so bad from a skull wound before."

Keno felt himself being lifted by shoulders and heels. The two men carried him a few yards, and then heaved him through the open door of a foul-smelling, open cattle car.

"I only wisht," he could hear Grovont saying venomously, "that his pardner, Whitey, was with him—the murderin' skunk!"

"Whitey will get what's comin' to him!" predicted the other. "They'll find him guilty, all right. He'll be hanged within six months!"

"Six months!" came the harsh, rasping voice of Grovont. "D'yuh think I'm goin' to wait six months to see him turned into a plumb bob? Not so's yuh can notice it! I tell yuh, this country will stand for a heap in the way of killin' in a fair fight. But it won't stand for any of this shootin' in the back, from ambush.

"No, sir! Whitey will be hanged before this day is over! And the gallows will be one of the big cottonwoods in the plaza at Mimbres. It'll be a necktie party, and I'll be host. Whitey will be jerked meat within an hour after sundown. And I aim to start the party just as soon

as it gets dark enough so's the few law-and-order bugs can't identify us! The train's starting. Jump aboard and stomp on his face till it's raw meat!"

A moment later, as the train started with a series of jerks, Grovont's companion jumped on Keno's bloody face with both high-heeled range boots. Keno felt consciousness departing again.

CHAPTER V

Off the Old Block

LONG before he could open his eyes again, Keno was aware of a monotonous clicking, like the magnified sound of some great clock. He realized that he was being jounced about and jolted. Every jolt caused a splitting pain to pierce his head. He was uncomfortably hot.

Presently he opened his eyes. But it was some minutes before he realized he was on the floor of the moving cattle car. Blinding sunlight was streaming through the slatted sides of the car. The light hurt his eyes. He closed them again.

He wanted to lapse back into unconsciousness, where there were no pains to stab his head. But he was uncomfortably aware something was wrong; someone was in trouble; someone needed him.

And so he fought off the lassitude that seemed so inviting. With a definite effort of his will he set about trying to remember what had happened.

The last he remembered, someone was jumping on his head, cursing him, kicking him cruelly. He raised a hand to his head. Exploring fingers could hardly identify his face, for it was swollen out of all semblance to the face of a human being. It was slashed and torn, and caked with dry blood. His scalp was a sodden and sticky mass. An involuntary shudder passed through him.

Dizzily he struggled to a sitting posture. Again he opened his eyes and blinked. Every movement caused excruciating pain. He remembered Grovont expressing the opinion his skull had been fractured. It felt as if it were cracked in a dozen places. But Keno had sense enough to realize he'd hardly be sitting here, alive and conscious, if that were so.

Little by little memory turned time backward. He recalled Grovont's words when he had said Whitey would be strung up in revenge for the killing of Peg Aspenell.

Keno stared from the open door of the cattle car at the glaring expanse of rocky hills and barren sand. Slowly it dawned upon him that the sun was high in the heavens. Uncertain fingers fumbled at the thong of his nickel-plated watch and drew it forth.

"Goshamighty - Mabel - Jane!" he muttered thickly. "Almost eleven o'clock! That musta been a awful wallop to lay me out for so many hours!"

His mangled face twisted into a painful, puzzled frown as he blinked through the door of the car. Vainly he tried to remember the panorama spread before him. Presently he decided one reason it looked unfamiliar was because the sun was in the wrong place. It took him some minutes to reason out that he had assumed the train was heading south, when in reality it was speeding west.

With a start he realized that during the hours of his unconsciousness the freight had swung clear around the end of the Dos Hermanos range, and was now close to the Mexican Border, en route for California!

It was some moments before the full extent of his calamity came home to him. He was far from Mimbres, where he had pledged his word of honor as the son of Honest John McGee to surrender that evening. Where Whitey was due to be lynched as soon as darkness fell!

Not only that, but the train was taking him further from Mimbres every minute!

He staggered to his feet. A wave of

giddiness engulfed him. He was forced to cling weakly to the slats for support. The freight rattled over a switch.

Ahead, where the treeless hills closed in, lay the little cluster of adobe buildings known as Cristobal. Now Keno knew his exact whereabouts. Cristobal was only a few miles from the Mexican Border, and a good day's ride, by horseback, from Mimbres.

"Goshamighty!" he muttered dizzily. "I got to get off this rattler and grab the next train back, or there'll be hell to pay!"

But the freight rattled right on through the adobe village without stopping. Keno was desperate. He knew the next station was many miles away. There seemed to be but one thing to do. He did it. He leaped from the door of the cattle car.

His legs were far too weak to withstand the shock when he struck the ground. In an instant he was rolling over and over in a cloud of dust. Sand had drifted over the jagged rocks of the roadbed, but despite this cushion Keno was a sorry sight when he staggered groggily to his feet.

Wounds on his head and face had broken open afresh. His bullhide chaps had protected his knees, but both elbows were torn and bleeding. His shirt was ripped clear off one shoulder—and so was most of the hide.

He staggered back toward the little town. His brain was reeling, and once he fell across the rails. He feared he would faint, and crawled to one side. A hundred yards ahead stood a water tank. All at once he was conscious of a terrific thirst. He clambered to his feet and tottered toward the tank. His knees played out again. He began to crawl. Then everything went black again.

A terrific rumbling and shaking of the ground roused him finally. He sat up. A passenger train was roaring through Cristobal, heading back toward Mimbres. Keno groaned. The reason he had ridden horseback from Cuyamaca to Mimbres was because there was but a single passenger train daily. And now, that one train had passed!

On his hands and bruised knees he crawled to the tank. Dripping water formed a pool beneath it. He drank, and drank, and drank again. Then, as best he could, he washed the caked blood from his head and face. But he was still a horrible sight when he rose to his feet, greatly refreshed, and started toward the cluster of buildings.

His lacerated, discolored and lumpy face looked like nothing human.

THE 'dobe building with the eight horses at the hitch-rail was plainly the *cantina*, or saloon. The general store was deserted. Keno made for neither, but went straight to the little boxlike railroad station. The station agent eyed the disfigured and tattered stranger suspiciously.

"What time," asked Keno, "does the next train leave for Mimbres?"

"This time tomorrow," answered the agent, scowling.

Keno groaned. It was the answer he feared. "How about a freight?" he asked anxiously.

"Git outa here, yuh bum!" snapped the agent.

"Listen, buddy," retorted Keno with a horrible distorted scowl, "I ain't a bum, see? If I can't get a train, I want to send a wire—collect."

"Collect? Guess again, 'bo. If I sent collect telegrams for all the Weary Willies that got tossed off the freights rolling through Cristobal—"

"But this is important, man! Goshamighty, a man's life depends on—"

"Yeah? And I've heard that one, too. Plank down yore cash, and I'll send yore wire. Otherwise, git out before I call the town marshal and have yuh salted down for thirty days!"

Instinctively Keno reached for his gun, intending to force the agent to send the wire to Sheriff Trott. But of course his holster was empty. He was fairly spluttering with rage. But

he realized it would bring nothing but disaster to start trouble. If he landed in the Cristobal jail, it might cost Whitey's life.

"Okay," he shrugged, with apparent meekness. He drew forth his nickel-plated watch. To his surprise, the leap from the train had not stopped it. He compared it with the station clock. Both told him it lacked five minutes of twelve o'clock.

GROVONT and his aide had rolled him of his wad, and Keno was without so much as a slick dime or a 'dobe dollar. He was boiling with anger and impatience as he moved outside again.

"I promised Sheriff Trott I'd show up by eight o'clock tonight. And if I don't get there by that time, it won't be only my word that's busted —Whitey's neck will be busted, too! Well, there's no chanct to git there in time, by train. And no chance to send a telegram to warn the sheriff that Grovont's planning to turn Whitey into jerked meat tonight!"

It occurred to him that he was only a few miles from the Border. A few miles east to Cumbres Pass, and then a few miles south, and he would be across the International Line, forever safe from the charge pending against him in Mimbres. Resolutely he put the tempting thought behind him.

"Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane! I got to get to Mimbres by tonight. I got to! I just *got* to!" he said to himself, almost frantic with impatience. But here it was noon, and Mimbres a day's ride away.

"A day's ride," he repeated, slowly. "A day's ride—when a body's just joggin' along, an' takin' it easy. But—I wonder. I wonder, if yuh cut straight across the Dos Hermanos hills, and prodded yore hoss for all that's in him, if yuh could mebbe make it?"

But he knew no horse could make it, through heavy sand and across treacherous *malpais*, before the eight o'clock deadline. Even his palomino, which possessed as much bottom as any horse he'd ever ridden, would play out before reaching the halfway point, if pressed forward at anything like top speed.

He recalled that the old pony express riders had averaged as much as eighteen miles an hour for long distances. But they had good trails and frequent changes of horses.

"I could make Mimbres before the deadline, I reckon, if I could get fresh hosses," he thought. "But I ain't even got *one* hoss, much less a change!"

His eyes rested enviously on the string of sag-hipped, droopy-headed hammerheads hitched to the tie-rail across the street. The chestnut, second from the nigh end, was a right likely looking nag; one that seemed to combine speed and stamina. With a few such horses—

"I'll do it!" he resolved suddenly. "I'll grab that hoss and start out. They's only a chance in a hundred that I can get to Mimbres before the deadline, but this is the only way that offers even a Chinaman's chance!"

Keno was well aware of the penalty for grabbing someone else's horse. But this time the circumstances seemed to warrant it. Wasn't the life of his pal, as white a gent as ever pounded leather, at stake? It wasn't like he was taking the horse with the intention of selling it. As soon as he'd finished with the animal, he'd turn it loose, and it would find its way home.

Having argued himself into making the decision, he lost no more time. He ambled over to the tie-rail and, as idly as if it were his own horse, started to unfasten the bridle reins.

He heard a sudden shout behind him. It was the station agent, who had been watching him suspiciously. Keno vaulted into the saddle and fed the animal the steel. It wheeled, and was off like a flash.

A moment later eight men surged through the swinging doors of the *cantina*. As they followed the pointing finger of the station agent and

saw Keno streaking it away on the chestnut, they were galvanized into instant action.

Two or three whipped out their six-guns. The rest leaped for their horses. In a moment guns were barking. Hot lead hummed past Keno's ears and kicked up little geysers of sand under the flying heels of the mount. He bent low over the saddle-horn and didn't look back.

Another moment, and the seven horses remaining at the rail were thundering after him. Six-guns snarled a chattering staccato of deadly hate in his wake. Horsemen were quirting their mounts, yelling at every jump.

Keno headed, not north in a direct line for Mimbres, but east through the mesquite-covered valley.

CHAPTER VI

The Race Begins

AT THAT moment Keno would have traded a hind leg for some kind of weapon. A few bullets planted judiciously in the trail in front of the leaders would do wonders to slow up the pursuit, he knew. As it was, all he could do was to crouch low in the saddle and hope against hope that none of the bullets humming 'round his head would lay him low.

A quick glance over his shoulder showed him that one man had been left behind, afoot, with the bartender. Plainly, this was the owner of the chestnut horse.

"Plug the hoss thief!" the fellow was yelling at the top of his voice. "Plug him, boys—but for gosh sake don't shoot the hoss!"

Keno thought his pursuers were paying scant heed to the advice of their comrade, for a dozen times bullets seemed to miss the chestnut by mere inches. However, it doubtless meant some would shoot wide of the mark, and to that extent his escape would be aided.

Keno's judgment of horseflesh presently began to justify itself as the chestnut widened its lead over the pursuers. His ability to select the best mount in the lot gave him a slight edge.

He held to the trail leading through the mesquite, straight east from Cristóbal. Low, rocky hills crowded in on either side. The trail paralleled the railroad tracks for several miles, winding among the huge but sparse clumps of mesquite, each clump growing from a good-sized hummock of sand.

Keno didn't know this country like he knew the range around Mimbres. But he knew that at the point where the railroad swung north to get around the Dos Hermanos hills, the trail swung south, leading through Cumbres Pass and across the International Boundary.

"If I can get far enough ahead of 'em to get outa sight before we reach the turn in the trail, I stand a fair to middling chance of slickering 'em," Keno panted as he rode.

He was pushing the chestnut for all it was worth, now. The pony was splitting the wind like a scared jackrabbit running one jump ahead of a prairie fire. Not as good a horse as his own palomino, but plenty good enough to keep ahead of the pursuers, he conceded.

Now the shooting dwindled away as he drew ahead far enough to be hidden part of the time as the trail wound between the mesquite clumps. Every time they caught sight of him, however, there was a fresh outburst of yelling and shooting. But now he had no more fear of being winged by a .45 slug, for he was well out of revolver range.

When he reached the bend in the trail he swung to the south. Forty yards beyond he cut to the left into the mesquite, slanting backward on a course just east of north. Once more he was shrinking close to the saddle-horn. For here the mesquite was tall enough to conceal a horse, but not a rider who sat erect in the saddle.

Keno didn't wait to see the result

of his ruse. He lined out northward into the mesquite, hell for leather. He could hear the thud of hoofs as his pursuers rounded the turn and headed south. A quick glance over his shoulder showed him a faint cloud of dust rising above the mesquite, marking the course of the cavalcade.

KENO was banking on the fact that everybody would assume an escaping horse thief would make for the Mexican Border as a matter of course. If they didn't see him leave the trail, they wouldn't dream he'd turn northward. They'd keep on following the trail south until they noticed the prints of his horse didn't show in the sand, or until they reached the Border and gave up the chase.

Keno chuckled as he pressed forward. "Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane!" he grinned through swollen lips. "I shore made monkeys out of 'em, that time. Even if they *do* discover how I've jobbed 'em, they couldn't ever catch up with me now! I got too much of a start on 'em. But I'd shore pay seventy-two dollars for a forty-cent beefsteak, right now!"

Had it not been for the pressure of time, he would have hidden out in the mesquite until the pursuing party returned to Cristobal. But if he hoped to make good his one chance in a hundred of getting back to Mimbres before the eight o'clock deadline, he could not waste time.

And so presently he abandoned the cover of the mesquite in the valley, and headed straight up the slope of one of the shoulders of the Dos Hermanos hills. The slope was rocky and afforded virtually no cover, other than cactus. A horseman climbing the face of the hill would be visible for many miles, Keno knew. His pursuers might spot him.

But what of it? He could outdistance them.

At the summit he halted to spell his horse a moment, and glanced backward. He could see nothing whatever of his pursuers. He believed they must have ridden clear to the International Line.

Between him and Mimbres lay a wild, desolate region of volcanic rock and sand hills. He was well acquainted with the Mimbres country, but knew little of the Cristobal range except the main trail to the Border. He was well aware, however, that somewhere across this barren stretch cattle rustlers trailed their stolen critters to and from the Border. Whitey's homestead straddled the northern gateway to the "underground trail" used by the rustlers. Keno found himself wondering whether Peg and Grovont had been operating a legitimate ranch, or whether the Cartwheel was merely a blind for more sinister purposes.

He was pushing the chestnut across the hills at a steady pace, but not at the breakneck speed at which he had started. He hoped to pick up a fresh mount somewhere along the route. There was no sense in killing off his horse and leaving himself stranded in such a desolate region.

Now and then he looked back. But he could see no trace of pursuers. He was beginning to get thirsty again, and weak from hunger and loss of blood. He knew that somewhere ahead he would have to cross the Candelaria River, and there he would find water for himself and his horse—unless the stream had dried up, as was sometimes the case during the summer.

He looked at his watch, and mentally calculated the distance he had covered since leaving Cristobal.

"If I can keep up this pace, I can reach Mimbres, easy, before the deadline," he said aloud. But he knew it would be impossible to hold the pace unless he could find a new horse somewhere.

He didn't blame Grovont a whole lot for trying to get rid of the man whom the rancher believed had helped dry-gulch Peg Aspenell. If Grovont really believed he had been Whitey's companion, his action seemed natural enough. But if Grovont's story, as repeated by Sheriff Trott, were true, who was Whitey's partner?

To Keno, it didn't make sense that

Whitey would desert his closest friend, and then pick up someone else to aid him in the killing of his bitterest enemy.

"For the matter of that," he muttered as he rode, "it jest don't stand to reason that Whitey would pull off a killin' thataway. It's jest like him to get tight and lose his head and shoot somebody — but not in the back. The daggone fool would bust right up to his enemy and call him a lungful of dirty names, and then prob'ly get hisself shot 'cause he coudn't tell which end of his six-gun to shoot with."

While he was still trying to figure it out he heard a shout behind him. Startled, he turned in the saddle. Over a rise, well behind him and to his left, came bulging a string of horsemen. As they sighted him, the foremost whipped forth their Winchesters and opened up on him.

Keno, cursing under his breath, rowelled the already weary chestnut. The animal responded nobly, humping it like a towhead deer. The rifles were popping, now, but Keno was well beyond the range of accuracy.

"Goshamighty - Mabel - Jane!" he gasped as he looked back over his shoulder. "How in thunder did they catch up with me so quick? I thought I'd left 'em so far behind that it'd take 'em a week to send me a telegram! Their hosses musta sprouted wings, or sails, or something!"

Then he became aware that the group was larger than the one that had pursued him out of Cristobal. The first had packed nothing but short arms, while these babies were equipped with Winchesters.

"It ain't the same bunch!" he burst out finally. "It's somebody else! I'll eat my chaps if it ain't a bunch of rustlers, or a posse, or something! But I reckon they's no way a posse could get after me so soon. And if it's rustlers, what are they chasin' me for?"

KENO'S mystification didn't lead him to put the brakes on the chestnut, however. Posse or rustlers, he didn't crave a closer acquaintance. He shoved his horse along for all it was worth and wished mightily that he possessed some sort of weapon.

Merely the sound of a six-gun popping would tend to keep them at a respectful distance. When he failed to return their fire, they'd daggone soon get wise to his lack of firearms, and their knowledge would make 'em a heap bolder if they ever got a chance to close in on him.

Keno tried to banish the uncomfortable knowledge that a face-to-face showdown with his pursuers was not a possibility, not a probability, but a certainty. Already his gallant chestnut was getting the puffs. Already the pursuers were narrowing the gap. Now and then a whining bullet would kick up the sand uncomfortably close upon the chestnut's heels.

He was slanting up a long, low, sandy incline. Beyond the infrequent clumps of cactus and Spanish bayonet, there was no shelter whatever. There was no opportunity to hide, or elude the horsemen as he had eluded the bunch that had chased him out of Cristobal.

Moreover, his head was throbbing painfully as a result of the long ride under the hot sun. Spells of dizziness would seize him now and then, and he would be forced to freeze to the horn to keep from toppling to the sand.

As he neared the top of the rise he looked back again. The horsemen, instead of swinging in directly behind him, kept well off to his left. Keno was puzzled, and a bit worried. He couldn't divine the reason for the maneuver.

He reached the top of the rise, and saw ahead of him the barren, shallow valley of the Candelaria River. And now the character of the country was changing. Here were occasional outcroppings of the *malpais*, or lava rock that was so common closer to Mimbres.

The moment he was over the crest of the swell and hidden from his pursuers he turned sharply to the right. He made no attempt to cover

his trail, inasmuch as his pursuers were so far to the left they'd be unlikely to see his tracks.

Just before he judged the enemy was due to show on top of the ridge, he turned into a dry gulch that led down into the Candelaria. Here, near the crest of the ridge, it was quite shallow, and he had to shrink close to the saddle to keep out of sight.

He grinned as he saw the horsemen top the rise and whoop it straight down toward the river. He knew they couldn't see him, and doubtless were assuming he was keeping out of sight in the outcroppings or rock ahead of them.

The Candelaria was two hundred yards wide and an inch deep. As Keno emerged from the tributary dry gulch, he headed the winded chestnut straight across the sandbar flats and into the shallow water. Just below a jutting chunk of lava rock, against which a mass of driftwood had saddlebagged, his horse suddenly sank hip-deep in the sand, and began to flounder.

Keno's heart leaped into his throat as he realized he was in a quicksand trap. He spurred the chestnut. The terrorized animal struggled frantically, but failed to extricate itself.

Keno felt a wave of giddiness enveloping him. He flung himself from the saddle. He hoped to struggle to the solid footing of that jutting rock.

But the violent exertion brought a sudden ringing in his ears. He felt himself falling, and then struggling in the quicksand.

CHAPTER VII

Creeping Death

FREED of Keno's weight, the chestnut struggled free amid a terrific splashing and floundered. Panic-stricken, it turned back. In the mouth of the little draw it halted, flanks heaving, head hanging. For a long time it stood there, too exhausted to move.

Meanwhile the feel of the water on his face restored Keno's reeling senses. He had not been unconscious; merely giddy from sheer weakness resulting from loss of blood and lack of food. But in the few moments when the world had seemed reeling under him and his eyes had refused to track, his muscles had gone back on him and he had sunk into the clutches of the quicksand.

Blind instinct set him struggling again as his brain began to function clearly once more. His legs had become engulfed in the sand at his first leap, just as the horse's had been. He had twisted sideward, as he had wilted under the dizzy spell. The few moments he had lain inert had fastened the deadly grip of the sand upon him.

Now he struggled to an erect position again. He found himself waist-deep in the quicksand. He was just below the jutting rock. Like wings on either side of him spread the driftwood that had caught on the protuberance. He was within ten feet of the nearer. Yet he speedily found it might as well be ten miles.

A desperate effort to struggle nearer the driftwood proved only that he could not draw his legs free from the treacherous sand. When he strove to tug one to the surface, his weight forced the other deeper.

He flung his body forward from the waist, arm outstretched, reaching for the driftwood. If once he could grasp it, it might keep him from sinking to a horrible death beneath the clutching sands. If he could merely draw a free chunk to him, he thought it might buoy him up enough to keep his head above the surface.

Keno was growing panicky at the prospect of being sucked to his death beneath the quicksand. He had faced death more than once in a face-to-face gun battle. But this was something else again—something fearsome, something terrifying, something from which he rebelled in utter horror!

Swiftly he loosened his belt and tossed it toward the driftwood, hoping it would catch. A dozen futile

casts proved the futility of the plan.

Suppose he should die here? Suppose he should die without leaving a trace? Sheriff Trott and everyone else would believe he had broken his solemn pledge and fled across the Border. Moreover, if he failed to warn the sheriff in time, his own death doubtless would mean the death of Whitey at the hands of the mob!

Keno groaned. He looked about helplessly. He saw his exhausted horse standing in the mouth of the draw. He recalled an old yarn about a man bogged down in a quagmire who had whistled to his horse, calling it near enough so he could rope the animal, which of course dragged him to freedom.

He whistled. The chestnut pricked up its ears listlessly. Then it moved wearily back up the draw until it was lost to sight.

The sand was well above his waist, now. In all his life Keno had experienced nothing quite so terrifying as this helpless waiting for a terrible death that seemed inevitable.

He caught the sound of voices and hoofbeats. For the moment he had forgotten his pursuers. Now he saw them, riding down the opposite bank, scanning the sand for footprints.

They could not see him, for the wings of the driftwood jam hid him. His horse was hidden in the draw on the near side of the stream. There were no telltale tracks. At the moment Keno was as safe from discovery as if he were already drawn beneath the surface.

If he kept silent they would never discover him. And he would die.

If he called out, they would save him from the quicksand. And if they were friends of the owner of the chestnut, would probably string him up immediately, as a horse thief. If they were a posse, the best he could expect would be to be turned over to the authorities, to face trial for the murder of Peg, with the gallows as his ultimate fate.

A swell choice! But there was some chance to dodge the gallows. And there was no chance to free himself of the quicksand, unaided. Moreover, Whitey's fate probably depended upon his escape.

"Yo-hoo!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "I'm stuck here like a cork shoved too far into a whiskey jug! Can't yuh rannies corkscrew me outa this?"

At his shout they halted abruptly. Their leader snapped out a command. To Keno's amazement and dismay, every last one of them turned and larruped his horse into a gallop, heading back the way they had come!

Keno groaned as he felt the wet sand rising about his chest. He was utterly dumbfounded. He could not imagine it possible that anyone should be so cold-blooded as to abandon a human being facing the death he was facing. Even though they intended to ornament a tree limb with his carcass immediately thereafter, a bunch with any human feeling would unbog him first.

Keno had hoped that when the time came for him to cash in his chips, he'd pass out fighting, with a gun in his hand. It seemed incredible that this should be the end of him —an end that found him helpless to stir a finger against the clutching, clammy claws of death.

HIS ears caught the sound of pounding hoofs again. He wrenched about. He was startled to see the same bunch of horsemen, riding toward him, hell-bent, down the near bank of the stream.

At a shouted command all reined in on the bank at the mouth of the draw, except their leader—a tall, dark young man on a coal-black horse. Shaking out a loop in his lass' rope, he edged his cayuse forward cautiously.

Then he cast his loop, dabbing it so it dropped on the shallow water 'round the trapped Keno.

"Take about six turns of the rope under yore arms," he advised. "If yuh don't, she's liable to saw yuh in two when I begin to put on the pressure."

"Okay," agreed Keno. "But don't

try to pop me out all of a sudden, like yuh'd bust a steer, or yuh'll only get the top half of me."

A minute later Keno was dragged slowly from the quicksand, while the horsemen on the bank held their guns trained upon him. As he clambered to his feet on the solid footing of the sandbar, he grinned his lop-sided grin, and said:

"Gents, thanks. I reckon I owe yuh all a heap. I've tailed up many a bogged-down critter, but daggone if I ever expected to be tailed up, my ownself. But they's one thing that's got me sorta addled, and I wisht yuh'd clear it up for me. Why did yuh high-tail it away so fast when first yuh seen me bogged down here?"

The young leader smiled grimly. "Reckon yuh're a stranger hereabouts, fella. Everybody knows the Candelaria is full of quicksands, and that the only safe cross-over is half a mile to yore left. That's why we didn't hug yore trail. We knowed what would happen to yuh if yuh tried to cross anywheres else. When yuh sung out at us, we didn't dast try to cross over to yuh right there, or the whole shebang of us would of been quicksanded, too. That's why we had to ride back to the cross-over, Keno."

KENO started. "How come *yuh* know my name?" he demanded suspiciously. "I never laid eyes on yuh before."

"Sheriff Trott of Mimbres ordered us to nab yuh. I'm his chief deppity for the southern part of the county. Name's Archuleta. But Trott didn't tell us to watch for a gent whose face had been scalped. What happened? Yuh look like yuh'd been run through a sausage grinder."

Keno was on his hands and knees, drinking greedily from the stream.

"My face?" He ceased drinking long enough to reply. "Oh, I jest forgot and left it on the railroad track, and a train run over it, that's all. But I don't exactly savvy what Sheriff Trott wants *me* for. Nor why he asked *you* to nab me. I didn't know he knew I was in this end of the county. Yuh see, I'd promised to drop in and see him tonight."

Deputy Archuleta smiled grimly again. "I see. Yuh figgered we was a few other fellas, huh? The bunch that chased yuh outa Cristobal, mebbe. Well, it's lucky for yuh we ain't. They don't generally waste much time on hoss thiefs. 'Kill 'em quick!' is their motto."

"If somebody'd give me a beefsteak first, I reckon I'd be willin' to let 'em hang me afterwards," shrugged Keno as he arose, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "But how in the name of the twenty-two tongue-tied horned toads did Trott know I was here?"

"After yuh escaped from Mimbres on the train, yuh made yore mistake in showing yoreself at Cristobal, fella," growled the deputy. "If yuh'd hoofed it straight acrost the Border, yuh'd be safe, now. The station agent suspicioned yuh, and when yuh stole the hoss he wired back to Mimbres, 'cause yuh'd mentioned the town, and asked was they looking for a suspicious-looking stranger. Trott said to grab yuh. I did."

Keno hitched up his sand-encrusted chaps, and shrugged.

"I was pretty dumb, I reckon. I can see how Trott figgered I was headin' for the Border when he learnt I was at Cristobal. But daggone if I can figger out why yuh didn't lay for me at Cumbres Pass. Why chase me in this direction when everybody thought I was heading for Mexico?"

The deputy laughed. "One of the bunch that chased yuh outa Cristobal had to stop, 'count of his hoss cast a shoe. He seen yuh ditch t'others and start back north. He couldn't follow yuh hisself, so he reported to the station agent, who notified me. I live on a ranch considerable this side of Cristobal. So I got a bunch of my ranch hands for a posse, and headed out here, and nabbed yuh."

"Well," grinned Keno, slapping the drying sand from his legs, "that was too bad! Too bad yuh went to all that trouble for nothing, I mean.

Gashamighty, man, I'm a close personal friend of Sheriff Trott! I'm on my way to see him, right now. So yuh won't need to bother holdin' *me.*"

"That's good," said the sheriff dryly. "I've heard some pretty good lies from prisoners, but yore'n takes the sterling silver bedbug trap. I reckon Trott ordered yuh arrested 'cause yore such a close friend that he craves yore company, huh? He says yuh're wanted for a lowdown kind of a murder. D'yuh expect me to believe yuh're going to Mimbres to surrender?"

"The murder charge is all a mistake, officer. Goshamighty, I—"

"They always are," drawled the deputy, "to hear the prisoner tell it. Well, we'll take yuh back to the Cristobal jail, and Trott can send for yuh if he wants yuh. If he don't, we'll try yuh for hoss-theivery."

"But, Goshamighty - Mabel - Jane!" protested Keno excitedly. "Yuh can't take me back to Cristobal, man! Why, if Trott ain't warned, there'll be a lynchin' at the Mimbres jail tonight! I got to get there, 'cause it's my pal who's due to be stretched! I don't care if yuh keep me prisoner, if yuh'll only get me to Mimbres by eight o'clock tonight!"

"Is that so?" asked Archuleta sarcastically. "It's all the same to you, is it? *Ain't* that nice! Boys, our prisoner don't mind what we do with him, long as it's accordin' to his druthers." As he turned back to Keno, his words snapped like a lash. "C'mon, get yore hoss. We're goin' to Cristobal!"

"But yuh can't do that!" protested Keno in sudden panic. "Yuh just can't! They'll lynch my pal! They'll—"

"Carlo!" Archuleta barked at one of his men. "If he gets tough, conk him!"

Filled with rage, Keno leaped at the deputy. But Carlo didn't need to conk him. Hunger and loss of blood laid him low as effectively as a bash on the skull. Sheer weakness caused his knees to jackknife. He pitched forward on his face in the sand; not unconscious—simply too feeble even to clench a fist.

CHAPTER VIII

Fightin' Fool

EVIDENTLY suspecting trickery, Archuleta whipped out his .45 and trained it on his prone prisoner. The rest of the possemen slipped from their saddles and darted forward across the sandbar. They clustered about him in a group as Carlo lifted Keno's head and shoulders.

"Vanishing vinegaroons!" exclaimed the posseman as he got a closer look at the gashes and bruises on Keno's face and scalp. "This baby has shore been through hell—and back again! He's took punishment that would kill two ordinary humans! No wonder he keeled!"

He pressed a flask to Keno's lips. The sting of the fiery fluid lashed Keno's numbing faculties into life.

"They's been a few gallons of blood dreened outa me," he grinned weakly. "But the real trouble is that I ain't et for so long my stummick thinks my throat was cut. Right now a whole barbecue beef would be only a appetizer for me."

"We didn't know how long we'd be out on yore trail," growled Archuleta, "so we brung grub to last over night." He holstered his gun, slid from the saddle, and untied the whangleather thongs that bound his slicker to the cantle. He drew forth a can of tomatoes, a chunk of beef and a handful of tortillas and handed them to his prisoner.

Keno wolfed down the food while his captors watched him in awe. He could feel the strength surging back into his limbs.

"Catch his hoss, somebody," directed the deputy. "We'll handcuff him to the saddle and get started. What with riding at a walk, 'count of his played-out cayuse, we won't get back to Cristobal before midnight."

By midnight! Keno groaned. He

had hoped, as a last resort, that Archuleta might be induced to telegraph from Cristobal a warning of Grovont's plan to lynch Whitey. But midnight would be hours too late! By that hour Whitey would be swinging in the moonlight on the limb of a cottonwood.

"Stand up," ordered the deputy. "Stand up, and tell me how yuh got all bunged up like yuh been rasslin' a catamount, or fighting a buzz saw."

"Okay," agreed the refreshed Keno as he rose to his feet. "Yuh see, I'm waitin' here for the freight to go by, and a coupla gents creeps up behind me. When they're about over there where the possemen are lookin' for my hoss—no, yuh're lookin' too far; I mean right about there, at the mouth of the draw. Don't yuh see where I'm pointin'?"

"Uh-huh," frowned Archuleta.

"Okay," grinned Keno, and then whipped the .45 out of the deputy's holster.

Before Archuleta realized what was happening, Keno jabbed the captured gun in his back, and continued:

"And then the big, bad men says to me, they says: 'Let a squawk outa yuh, yuh dashety-blanked catawampus, and I'll scatter yore stuffin's all over southern Arizona!' Do I make myself clear, Archie?"

"Help!" bellowed the deputy.

THE six-gun in Keno's hand roared thrice. Simultaneously he grabbed for the trailing bridle reins of Archuleta's black gelding.

At the bark of the weapon every posseman spun about. They beheld Keno firing into the sand in front of their group of horses. At the third shot the terrified animals stampeded, heading back up the draw. The stampede scattered the members of the posse. They were too intent on dodging the panicky horses to think of shooting. When the cayuses had thundered past and they had time to grab at their weapons, they found their erstwhile prisoner standing with his captured gun in their leader's back.

"Don't do nothin' rash, boys," advised Keno grimly, "or yuh'll have to go to the trouble of luggin' Archie's carsass home. I don't want to drill him, but I'll shore do it if any of yuh makes a play for his gun. Now, John Archuleta Law, do a little backsteppin' whilst we ease ourselves outa the picture."

Leading the cursing deputy's horse, and forcing the officers to back away with him, Keno edged around the sandbar until he reached the bank.

"It'll take you boys quite a spell to catch yore stampeded hosses," he said to the deputy, chuckling. "By that time I'll have such a start that yuh'll never catch up with me. And to show yuh that I appreciate yore ridin' all the way out here just to bring me lunch and a gun and a fresh hoss, I'll throw yuh a nice, big kiss when I get in the saddle."

Another moment, and he was behind a jutting shoulder of the bluff. He swung into the saddle, laid the leather into the black, and started splitting the wind, followed by Archuleta's curses. Shortly the possemen came surging around the shoulder of the bluff, and began emptying their six-guns at him.

But Keno was well out of shortgun range, and the possemen's rifles were in the scabbards, on the stampeded horses. He waved a derisive farewell as he headed for the ford.

By following the tracks of the posse he found the cross-over easily enough. Once, as he ascended the hill on the farther side, he looked back and saw they had caught his weary chestnut, and were using it to catch the others. He drew forth his nickeled watch. It had remained unharmed by the brief immersion in the quicksand. He frowned as he noted the time.

He had lost almost forty minutes. Even with a fresher horse, it was a toss-up whether he could make the deadline.

The black was shoving the country behind him at a rapid pace. Keno thought the posse had abandoned the chase, but after a while he caught sight of a plume of dust behind him. His pursuers were far behind, but

nevertheless he was uneasy. He was armed, now, but what if his horse should lame itself traversing the *malpais?* He might fight off recapture, but that wasn't the point.

"I reckon I'm worryin' over nothin'," he told himself finally. "After all, I couldn't want anythin' better than to ride into Mimbres two jumps ahead of a good-sized posse that may be needed in fightin' off a lynchin' mob."

But he was still less than halfway to Mimbres, and the really tough country lay ahead of him. Any way he figured it, he couldn't see how the black could last that long.

On the other hand, Whitey's little homestead, the Cartwheel ranch, and the old McGee ranch were all between him and Mimbres. If he could pick up another fresh horse at one of the three, he might still make it in time.

His head was aching terrifically, and every bone and muscle in his body pained him. But otherwise he was in far better shape physically than before his encounter with the posse. He had regained his strength, and the dizzy spells no longer troubled him.

The black was no better than the chestnut, but it was fresher. Backward glances from the crest of the ridges told Keno he was more than holding his own; was gaining slightly on the plume of dust that marked his pursuers.

"Goshamighty!" he exclaimed as he looked at his watch. "I'm doin' a heap better'n I figgered! It ain't so many miles to Whitey's homestead. If I can get a fresh hoss there, I oughta make it, easy!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before his horse went lame. He dismounted, and spent precious minutes prying a keen sliver of lava rock out of the near hind hoof of the black.

But the damage was done. Now, instead of gaining on his schedule, he began to lose. He cast an anxious eye at the declining afternoon sun. He was glad Whitey's place wasn't far ahead.

But when he reached it, he found his pal's shack a smoldering heap of coals. Corral fences had been smashed, and livestock scattered far and wide.

"Grovont, and his Cartwheel gang!" exclaimed Keno as he surveyed the ruins of the little place. "Now that Whitey's in jail and can't fight back, they come over here and wipe his ranch off the map, the cowardly polecats!"

But so far as Keno was concerned, the greatest calamity was the scattering of the horses. None was in sight in the narrow pass which Whitey's homestead straddled. He might find them on top of the mesa on one side of the trail, or the other.

But it would be a matter of mere happenstance, and if he had no luck, he'd lose so much time that he'd never reach Mimbres before the deadline.

"I stand just as much chance of findin' the stampeded hosses between here and the forks," he reasoned, and shoved the limping black on down the trail.

A BACKWARD look from the top of the pass failed to reveal a trace of pursuit. Keno hoped Archuleta and his men had abandoned the chase. But he didn't kid himself that this hope necessarily represented the facts. The absence of dust behind him might mean merely that the posse was crossing a patch of *malpai.*

Minutes seemed hours as the impatient Keno progressed down the trail at a snail's pace. He spent his time looking from his watch to the sun, and cussing. He found no trace of Whitey's stampeded horses by the time he reached the forks in the trail—the spot where Sheriff Trott had nabbed him the night before.

He dismounted and read sign. It was plain to be seen that no body of horsemen had passed over the trail in the direction of Mimbres recently. Keno heaved a sigh of relief.

"They *could* head direct to town from the ranch, but it ain't likely, because they'd have to cross over a

steep mountain ridge, and there's no reason for not takin' the easy way," he told himself, frowning. "It's a cinch this hoss can't make another mile. If I get stranded afoot betwixt here and Mimbres, I'll be just as helpless as if I was in jail back at Cristobal. I got to do something. I got to think myself out of the fix. If I don't, Whitey's neck is going to be cracked before very many hours."

The knowledge that Whitey's life depended upon his decision was a responsibility that caused Keno to do some heavy thinking in the few moments he stood, literally and figuratively, at the forks of the trail.

"If I can't warn Sheriff Trott of the scheme to lynch Whitey, I can do somethin' jest as good," he said at length. "It'll mean that I break my pledge to the sheriff. But if I got to choose between my word and Whitey's life, my word can go to hell!

"Whitey chose the Narrows as the spot to dry-gulch Peg, because it's one spot between here and the Cartwheel ranch where he could lay in hiding and knock his victim off. It's the one place where I can lay in ambush and absolutely prevent Grovont and his gang from gettin' through. One man with a gun at the Narrows can stand off an army. If I can keep Grovont and his gang from reaching Mimbres tonight, that's all I ask! It's all that's needed to save Whitey's pelt!"

So, having made his decision, Keno turned his limping mount up the trail toward the Cartwheel ranch. The horse played clear out half a mile before he reached the Narrows. Keno went forward afoot, running, stumbling, sometimes falling in his desperate need to reach the spot before Grovont and his gang.

He flung himself down, breathless, on the smooth sand behind the twin spires of lava known as Rabbit Ear Rock. But the near side of the trail as it passed through the Narrows was edged with manzanita shrubs that would screen approaching riders from view. Keno leaped to his feet and ran forward to the shelter of a small rock at the very edge of the trail.

And he was not a moment too soon. As he dropped to the earth behind his meager barricade, he heard the clatter of approaching hoofs. With Grovont in the lead, the Cartwheel gang appeared 'round the jutting shoulder of the canyon wall.

Keno's six-gun roared.

CHAPTER IX

Gunfire Gap

GROVONT had caused Keno to be beaten within an inch of his life and shipped away in the cattle car to die. Keno could have asked nothing better than to send a .45 slug smashing through his scowling face. Keno could have dropped Grovont with his first shot. He hated the ranchman, whose shaggy black brows were always twisted in a scowl, and whose machinations he blamed for all his pal's troubles.

But Keno wasn't the kind to shoot anyone from ambush, even his worst foe. His shot echoed through the Narrows. His bullet zipped through the crown of Grovont's expensive white J. B. hat.

"Halt!" barked Keno. "Whoa-up, yuh polecats, or we'll fill yuh full of lead!"

Grovont reined his horse so sharply the animal reared on its hind legs. Instantly his right hand leaped to his holster. His followers ducked for cover, either in the manzanitas or behind the shoulder of rock whence they had just emerged.

Grovont's six-gun roared. As he fired he wheeled his horse and high-tailed it back down the trail and around the shoulder to safety. The next instant the close confines of the Narrows was echoing and re-echoing to the crash of gunfire. Bullets whipped and hummed and tore through the brush and flattened themselves on the face of Keno's little barricade.

Keno crouched low and grinned.

He had no need to expose himself to return the fire. He could crouch behind his rock, and the first time a Cartwheel rider showed himself on the trail at a spot opposite him, he could cut loose without risk to himself.

After some moments the firing died away, apparently in response to a command from Grovont. Keno heard the ranchman call out:

"Who are yuh, anyway? And what's the big idea?"

Keno shouted back:

"I'm Little Lord Fauntleroy, and I got my gang with me! The general idea is that we crave to play tiddledewinks in the Narrows, and the first blinkety-blanked so-and-so that horns in on us gets gutted with a Colt .45! Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane! If yuh got a lick of sense yuh'll—"

"*Now* I savvy who it is!" yelled Grovont in astonishment. "It's the other murderer! It's Whitey's sawed-off pal! The two of 'em butchered Peg last night in this very spot. And now this Keno gent is back again, tryin' to dry-gulch *me!* And yuh're all alone! Why, I thought yuh—"

"Yuh thought I was dead, huh?" broke in Keno with a chuckle.

He felt he was completely master of the situation, and was getting a big kick out of Grovont's discomfiture. "Yuh thought yuh'd almost massacreed me, and put me in a cattle car to die, didn't yuh? Well, I died, and this is my ghost come back to ha'nt yuh with a gun in each hand. And I brung with me a gang of right tough ghosts all of which died with their boots on and craves to help you boys die the same way. I know yuh can't possibly get around behind me. And if yuh try to come down the trail yuh'll get picked off one at a time. So if yuh crave to join Keno's gang of goshamighty ghosts, step right up and get yoreselves shot, gents!"

"I know what yuh're fixin' to do!" raged Grovont. "Yuh're aiming to stop us from—"

"Stop!" broke in a strange voice from behind Keno. "This is the law! You, Keno—claw holes in the sky, or get shot!"

Startled, Keno spun about. Crouching behind Rabbit Ear Rock he beheld the dusty and trail-weary Deputy Archuleta, a .30-30 leveled at him.

As Keno's six-gun whipped aloft, Archuleta fired.

Keno leaped aside at the very instant his .45 blazed away at the deputy. He heard the bullet spat against the rock. He heard a whoop of delight behind him. The next instant it seemed as if he had stuck his head in a hornet's nest. Bullets were whining through the air on every side of him.

Something whanged him in the shoulder—something that felt like the kick of a mule. It came from behind, and sent him staggering forward, spinning as he stumbled. He tried to swing his arms in a desperate effort to regain his balance. But his left arm was strangely numb. It would not respond to the urge of his will.

He crashed to the ground, twisting as he fell. With whoops of bloodthirsty triumph the Cartwheel hands burst from their cover, guns ablaze.

SO, too, did Archuleta. He was firing, not at the rolling figure of Keno, but over the heads of the advancing Cartwheel gang.

"Stop!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "In the name of the law! This man is my prisoner!"

Grovont, rushing toward the limp figure of Keno, suddenly halted and held up his hand to command his men to cease firing.

"This skunk helped murder my pardner last night!" he panted a moment later. "I'm glad we could help yuh catch him, Sheriff! He slipped away from Sheriff Amos Trott last night, and I was scared he'd made his getaway for keeps. I call upon yuh to witness that he'd ambushed us and was trying to murder me, too, when you got here. He's the most dangerous sidewinder that's ever bucked the law in this county!"

Deputy Archuleta looked down at

the inert form of the chunky cowpuncher with grudging admiration.

"If yuh've killed him," he said grimly, "yuh've killed one of the bravest, fightingest fools ever *I* see! Look at him—beat to a pulp, bloody, battered all to hell, but fighting like a catamount till the very last! He's made a monkey outa me once today; he's been through hell and back again. He's a criminal, and if he's alive I got to do my duty and arrest him. But, gents, crook or not—that's a *man!*"

He knelt by the side of the battered cowhand. "He's bleeding from a bullet wound in the shoulder," he announced, "which is no credit to whoever shot him from behind. And he's bleeding from another wound in the head—a fresh one. Hit his head on a jagged hunk of lava rock when he fell, like as not. We'll bandage him up, and he'll live to be hanged, I reckon. My hoss is played out, and so is his'n. Can somebody lend me coupla hosses, so's I can get him to the Mimbres jail?"

Grovont scowled and stroked his chin.

"Yuh look almighty weary, officer. And it's a right long ways to Mimbres. I'd be plumb proud to have yuh be my guest at the Cartwheel ranch overnight. Me and the boys was settin' out to some brush popping down in the brakes, but I reckon I could spare a coupla hands to take yore prisoner to jail for yuh." A crafty light gleamed from the eyes that peered from beneath shaggy brows as he finished.

"Why, that's right kind of yuh, mister," replied the unsuspicious Archuleta. "I'm dog-tired. I don't reckon there's any special hurry about getting to Mimbres. I thank yuh for yore hospitality. I'll spend the night at yore place. I wouldn't for the world discommode yuh by askin' yuh to take my prisoner to jail for me. I'll just keep him with me, over night."

Grovont's scowl deepened. But it was followed after a moment by a forced smile.

"Fair enough, officer. I'll send one of the boys back with yuh to stand guard whilst yuh sleep, 'cause it'll take us quite a spell to comb the brakes for strays, and we may not be back till pretty late. Boog, c'mere and help the sheriff. H'ist the prisoner onto yore hoss, and lug him back to the ranch."

As the cowhand flung the limp form of Keno across his horse, Grovont spoke to him in an undertone, and Boog nodded. Presently the Cartwheel gang was heading toward the forks, and Archuleta, Boog and Keno were making for the ranch.

THE sound of snoring was the first thing of which Keno was conscious when he regained his senses in a barren little room in the Cartwheel 'dobe ranchhouse.

He sat up, to find himself on a narrow bunk. His shirt was missing. His head and his left shoulder were in bandages. His left arm was in a sling. His wrists were shackled with handcuffs, and the sling made it necessary for him to hold his hands awkwardly in front of him in an attitude of prayer.

As he blinked the mist away, he saw a cowhand seated on the opposite side of the room. The fellow was in a chair tilted back against the door. Across his knees lay a rifle.

"I got to give it to yuh," remarked the guard. "Yuh're a fighting fool, fella. A fightin' fool."

"Where am I?" demanded Keno, staring about blankly.

"Cartwheel ranch. That ain't a sawmill yuh hear. It's the deputy sheriff snoring."

Keno gave a violent start. It wrenched his wounded shoulder.

"What time is it?" he snapped anxiously. It was impossible for him to manipulate his shackled hands so he could draw his watch. His guard's voice seemed vaguely familiar, but he could not place it. He knew he had never seen him before.

"Nigh onto sundown. Whatcha gittin' so excited about? Calm down, fella, and listen to me." The guard lowered his voice to a whisper.

"If they's anybody I admire, it's

a fighter. Like you. I hate to think of a brave man chokin' his life away at the end of a rope. Yuh helped kill my boss, Peg Aspenell. But I reckon he needed killin', much as anybody I know. I don't hold that ag'in yuh."

"What yuh driving at?" asked Keno suspiciously.

"Sh-h! Not so loud. Yuh might wake the depitty. Listen! There's a fresh, saddled hoss down by the corral. I swiped the keys to yore handcuffs after the depitty went to sleep. In a minute I got to go to the kitchen to fry some pigstrip. But I'm a almighty forgetful man. I might forget, and leave the keys when I go. And also yore six-gun."

Keno was dumbfounded. "I—I can't savvy why yuh're doing this, fella! Goshamighty, yuh might get into—"

"I'm doing it 'cause I don't want to see a brave man swing. And I won't get into any trouble that I can't talk myself outa. Of course, after yuh're almost outa sight, I'll start shootin' into the air and raising hell, but yuh needn't get worried, 'cause I'll jest be buildin' myself an 'out.' Before Archuleta can get to the pasture and rope hisself a hoss and get it saddled, yuh'll be far away back in the hills."

"That's—that's jest swell of yuh!" said Keno gratefully. "I don't know how to thank yuh!"

Boog grinned as he arose. He placed the keys and Keno's six-gun on the chair. "Take it easy," he advised as he tiptoed through the door. "Yuh're prob'bly pretty weak. Yuh was bleedin' like a punctured pig when we brought yuh in."

When he was gone Keno darted across the room. He snatched up the keys. Another moment, and the cuff on his left wrist flew open. But he found the wound had left him unable to grip the keys with the fingers of his left hand, so he was unable to open the other cuff. He left it dangling from his wrist as he grabbed the six-gun and leaped to the window. Sure enough, there was a saddled horse waiting at the corral!

He felt no particular weakness, though the guard had said he'd been bleeding like a punctured pig.

"Like a 'punctured pig.' Who have I heard say that?" he asked himself curiously. And then, suddenly:

"Now I remember! It was the jasper that helped Grovont mob me last night—the cuss that jumped on my face and tried to stomp me to death! I couldn't see him, but now I remember that voice! Why should he try to save me now, after trying to kill me last night?"

Suddenly he broke his six-gun and punched the shells from the chambers. The bullets had been removed from every last one of 'em!

CHAPTER X

Deadline

BOOG'S plot was plain enough, now. It was the old Mexican *ley fuga* game—the law of flight, justifying one in killing an escaping prisoner. The guard, doubtless following Grovont's orders, was trying to murder him; to murder him legally.

With difficulty, because of his wounded arm, Keno shoved good shells into his weapon. Then, instead of climbing out the window, there to be shot down in cold blood, he tiptoed through the door, and into the *patio*. His guard was kneeling at the corner, rifle in hand, patiently waiting to do murder.

Keno leaped forward, gun upraised. The guard heard him, and whirled. The rifle crashed, reverberating through the *patio*. Keno's gun crashed down on the treacherous Boog's skull. Boog folded. Keno heard Archuleta shout behind him.

He darted 'round the corner of the building. Another horse was standing at the tie-rail. With his left arm useless, it was difficult to mount. But a moment later he was lining out like the wind.

And Archuleta was rushing from the house behind him. A bullet whanged a nearby rock and glanced away, screeching. Keno looked over

his shoulder. The deputy sped toward the horse waiting down by the corral. He vaulted into the saddle and slammed home the steel. The animal bolted. The saddle turned and the deputy crashed to the ground.

"Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane! What a break!" grinned the speeding Keno. "The guard, to make shore I'd never escape even if I got as far as the hoss, must have cut the cinch! But the depitty was the one he caught in his trap, instead of me!"

THE sun was sinking behind the distant hills when Keno reached the forks of the trail and turned toward Mimbres. Leaving the bridle reins looped over the horn, he tugged his watch forth with his free hand. Then he groaned.

"Eight o'clock—already! The deadline—an' I'm still miles from Mimbres! I've broken my solemn promise, for the first time in all my life! The son of Honest John McGee has broke his word! But that ain't the half of it. When I don't show up by the deadline, the sheriff will leave to hunt for me, and the jail will be unprotected. Grovont will take Whitey out and hang him!"

He moaned as he urged the galloping horse to greater speed.

"I'll be to blame for Whitey's death—me, and nobody else! When I started from Cristobal I figgered I could help Whitey by warnin' Sheriff Trott of Grovont's lynchin' plans. That was all I expected to do! But since then I've gained the evidence that would prove Whitey didn't murder Peg! Evidence so plain that anybody could see it! Evidence that gives me an alibi, too Evidence that absolutely proves who *did* kill him. And now—now I'll be too late! By the time I get to Mimbres Whitey's corpse will be swingin' from a cottonwood in the plaza!"

Keno's fearsome prediction lacked about sixty seconds of proving absolutely true. As he thundered down the dusty main street of the cow town, he found the plaza filled with a shouting, milling throng.

Seated on a horse beneath a towering cottonwood, his hands lashed behind him, was Whitey Bushrod. His throat was in a noose, and the rope was tossed over a branch above him, even as Keno arrived.

The door of the jail was smashed off its hinges. Sheriff Trott was nowhere to be seen.

"Hi-yah, broad fella!" came above the clamor of the surging mob. "I knowed yuh'd come, old-timer! The swellest pal a feller ever had!"

A hush suddenly settled on the plaza. All eyes turned toward the approaching horseman. A terrible picture he made as he thundered up.

Bloody bandages fluttered in the wind from both his head and shoulder. His slashed and battered face seemed hardly human. From his wrist the handcuffs still dangled. His hand gripped his six-gun while he controlled the galloping horse solely by the pressure of his knees.

"String him up!" screamed the voice of Grovont frantically. "Hoist Whitey, yuh hellions! And then grab his pal and swing him, too!"

There was no time to tie the rope that had just been tossed over the branch. The Cartwheel hand who caught it threw his weight against it. At the same instant Grovont cut Whitey's horse with his quirt. The frightened animal leaped forward. Whitey was dragged from the saddle —was swinging in the air, twisting and squirming. A howl went up from the mob like the howl of a pack of blood-slavering wolves.

Then Keno's gun barked. The Cartwheel hand on the other end of the rope yelled, coughed, spat blood, and collapsed. The bound form of the intended victim crashed to earth in the midst of the crowd.

Instantly a dozen six-guns were spouting flame and lead at the thundering horseman. Beneath the hail of bullet's Keno's horse stumbled and went down. Keno was pinwheeling wildly through the air—straight into the heart of the mob!

"Kill him!" Grovont was screaming wildly. "Stomp him to death!"

Half a dozen men went down as

Keno struck them like a missile from a catapult. The chunky, bleeding, tattered fighting fool bounced to his feet, gun blazing. It blasted a path for him, and Keno was soon at the side of his pal.

There was no time to attempt to untie Whitey's bonds. With only one good hand, and that needed for his gun, it was utterly impossible. With the last shell in the weapon Keno blazed away—straight at his prone pal!

The bullet sliced through the knot at Whitey's wrists. Another split instant and he, too was on his feet. Then the mob closed in on them like an engulfing wave.

Back to back Keno and his pal fought, with the fury of cornered wildcats. The Cartwheel gang dared not use their guns at such close quarters for fear of shooting one another. Grovont rushed in, snarling, his .45 upraised to use as a club. Just as it was about to crash down on Whitey's skull Keno turned and flung his own empty weapon into the ranchman's face. It caught Grovont squarely between the eyes. He went down like a busted steer.

Keno flailed about him with the handcuffs with the desperation of a madman. Neither he nor Whitey, nor yet the members of the mob, saw a mounted man thundering out of the darkness into the plaza. It was Deputy Sheriff Archuleta. He had captured the horse after Boog had cut the cinch. Unable to repair the cinch or find another saddle, he had mounted bareback and had trailed his erstwhile prisoner to Mimbres.

But it was not the appearance of the deputy so unexpectedly that broke the spirit of the mob. Keno had won the fight when he had knocked Grovont senseless. Leaderless, the Cartwheel gang wavered, broke and fled just as Archuleta came galloping into the plaza.

Keno dived for Grovont's fallen gun. Whitey broke for the shelter of the cottonwood tree. Another instant, and Keno—shirtless, tattered, and covered with blood—was crouching with Grovont's captured .45 in his good hand, pumping bullets into the panic-stricken lynchers.

"Stop!" bellowed Archuleta as he flung himself from his horse alongside Keno and Whitey. "In the name of the law!"

Then he whirled on Keno and Whitey. "Into the jail, both of yuh!" he snapped. "Yuh haven't a chance out here!"

"Not without Grovont!" panted Keno. He stooped, striving to drag the senseless ranchman. But his one good hand was not sufficient.

"Out of the way, broad fella!" gasped Whitey, grinning as he leaped forward and grabbed Grovont. "You hold 'em off with yore gun and I'll drag him inside!"

A MOMENT later the three of them stumbled through the door of the jail. To Keno's amazement, he saw Sheriff Amos Trott bound and gagged on the office floor. He had assumed Trott had been absent hunting him when the Cartwheel mob had launched the lynching party. Archuleta yanked Trott's bonds loose, just as a patter of bullets and the crackling of guns showed the mob was making a new stand.

Trott jumped to a closet and yanked forth a Winchester for each of the four. They needed no commands. They opened up, firing at the flashes. Keno found it almost impossible to use his rifle with only one good arm. He flung it aside and went back to his six-gun. A dozen shots from the jail windows, and the remaining Cartwheelers quit cold. When the clatter of hoofs down the main street told of their panicky retreat, Sheriff Trott turned to Archuleta, panting.

"Yuh done great work!" he gasped. "Yuh brought yore prisoner in, jest in time to prevent the lynching!"

"Brought him in?" repeated Archuleta, a little sheepishly. "I follered him in! And what a job it was to keep up with that scrapping hellcat! He'd knocked Grovont groggy and won the battle before I even arrived! And the only reason we're safe now is because he drug Grovont

in here, to keep him as a hostage."

"Hostage, hell!" exclaimed Keno breathlessly. "I had Whitey lug him here because Grovont hisself is the murderer of Peg Aspenell."

FOR a moment the three stared at him. Then Trott said:

"Pore cuss! He's gone slug-nutty, I reckon. He looks like he's been all shot to pieces, chawed up by a cougar, and spit out in hunks."

"No, I ain't crazy," protested Keno, grinning. "Listen, and I'll prove it by Archuleta. Archie, when yuh snuck up behind the Rabbit Ear Rocks and stuck me up at the battle of the Narrows, did yuh see any tracks in the sand there? Behind the rocks, I mean—as if somebody had lain in ambush there?"

"I'm sorry, Keno," replied Archuleta. "I like yuh fine, and I admire yuh as the fightin'est gent ever I see. But I wouldn't tell a lie to set yuh free. I seen the prints of a man in the sand there, plain as day!"

"Of one man, or two?"

"Of jest one."

"And you seen me creep up there just a few minutes before, didn't yuh? Yeah? Well, then, yuh know those tracks could have been made by nobody but *me!* Before I came, the sand was perfectly bare, wasn't it? Sheriff Trott, I reckon that proves Grovont lied when he said Peg was dry-gulched by a coupla gunmen behind the Rabbit Ear, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," admitted the bewildered Trott. "But proving he lied about that point don't prove an alibi fer you two."

"I wanted to hide behind the Rabbit Ear to halt Grovont and his gang," Keno went on swiftly. "I couldn't. Why? Because the manzanitas made a screen in front. Nobody planted there could shoot a man on the trail. Does that prove Grovont was lying? Goshamighty-Mabel-Jane! Can't yuh see that nobody possibly could of killed Peg except the gent that was riding right by his side—or jest behind him?"

"Yuh mean to say," demanded the dazed sheriff, "that Grovont killed his own pardner? Why, he'd be crazy to do such a thing!"

"Crazy—yeah. Like a fox. Peg was brother to Grovont's wife. Who inherits Peg's share of the Cartwheel ranch? His sister—Grovont's wife! Through his wife, Grovont stood to own the whole shebang, instead of half. By framing Whitey, and getting him hanged, he could get two birds with one stone and make a fortune out of driving stolen herds to Mexico!"

"Well, I'll be piled!" cried Whitey in astonishment. "And all the time I never doubted for a minute that I killed Peg! Yuh see, I was pretty tight when I rode outa Mimbres, follering 'em. I intended to kill him, if I could. When they collared me and said I'd done it, I thought they were right, though I couldn't remember what happened after I passed the forks."

"Yuh just naturally passed out and fell off'n yore hoss," grinned Keno. "And now that it won't get Whitey in trouble, Sheriff, I'll refer yuh to the blacksmith, who'll swear I was asking him where Whitey went, at the time of the killin'. The only thing that gripes me, Sheriff, is that I broke my word to yuh. I promised to surrender before eight o'clock. And here it is six minutes of nine."

"Nine?" exclaimed the sheriff. "Look at the wall clock, man!"

Keno looked at the office clock. It showed the time to be exactly six minutes of eight. He drew forth his nickeled watch. It showed exactly six minutes of nine.

"Listen, broad fella." Whitey was speaking to his pal, but he winked at the officers. "Yesterday afternoon yuh looked at that turnip, and got mixed up on the hour because you'd forgot to change it a hour after leaving Cuyamaca, when it shoulda been changed from Pacific to Mountain time. Don't tell me yuh ain't changed it yet!"

Next Month: Mesa of Branded Skulls, by Grant Taylor

Treacherous Trails

Malabree whirled, ripped out an oath, and blazed away

Two Ex-Rustlers Come Back to Fiddle Creek—and Gun Music Echoes Over the Basin!

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Triangled Triggers," "Trigger Trapped," etc.

WITH a film of badland dust on his limp hat, and with his peg leg dangling over the footboard on the light spring wagon, old Barney Denton jogged his team of trim little buckskins toward the clump of cottonwoods at the Fiddle Creek Crossing. A smile, mellow as the glow of sunset through which he was riding, came to the range veteran's face as he caught sight of a dirt roof looming ahead. The smile developed into a soft chuckle as he remembered the checker game he had had with old "Horseshoe" Merritt during his last trip through Fiddle Basin.

"Hello, Horseshoe!" Barney's

whoop was lusty as he swung his team around the corner of the road ranch's main building and came to a halt.

But the man who appeared in the doorway wasn't Horseshoe Merritt, as the jovial visitor had expected. The squat individual confronting him was not a friend, as could be seen in the hostile, narrowed eyes glittering from under their canopy of apelike brow.

"Cadge Malabree!" old Barney blurted, surprise driving the smile from his face.

"Yeah," the other grunted. "New owner o' this road ranch. But kinda partikler who he puts up fer the night. In other words, keep them wheels on yore damned band wagon rollin' right on past this place!"

"Shore." An alien coolness crept into the old man's drawl. "If yuh've bought Horseshoe out, I won't bother to stop here no more. I'll sleep out under the stars. With the snakes that are decent enough to rattle afore they strike."

"Meanin'—w h a t?" An ominous scowl darkened Cadge Malabree's features.

Barney pointed to the peg leg still dangling over the footboard.

"Meanin' t h i s," he answered, evenly. "I used to have a real foot there when I was ridin' for the W Diamond. 'Fore one of Rustler Swayne's riders—the one I happen to be lookin' at jest now—shot a hoss from under me. An' me partly under the hoss."

"Too bad yuh couldn't prove it," Malabree sneered, toying with a gold watch charm suspended from the buttonhole of his vest. "That's why we're on the outs, Denton. 'Cause yuh got up in court an' swore to a lie. Swore that I was in cahoots with Simon Swayne. Why, an honest feller like me wouldn't have nothin' to do with Swayne."

"Lots o' things is so that can't be proved," came the retort. "But what's done is done. I'll let yuh alone, Malabree. An' you let me alone."

"One thing more," the younger man called. "I'm startin' a little store here, along with this road ranch bus'ness. That means I don't want no peg-legged *hombres* travelin' around in Fiddle Basin sellin' stuff out of a band wagon. If yuh know what's healthy fer yuh, Denton, yuh'll make this yore last trip through Fiddle Basin."

"I was here first, an' I'll keep right on peddlin' blankets, lariat ropes an' guns to my friends," Barney declared. "Besides, it's the only way I've got of makin' a livin', thanks to you, Malabree."

"Still achin' fer trouble, eh?"

"Nope. Jest refusin' to be bluffed by a skunk that ain't got nerve enough to fight fair."

Malabree growled, bristled. His nervous fingers edged toward his .45, then hesitated, twitching, as he glared up into old Barney's alert blue eyes. In that brief instant, akin to the moment of tenseness between the lightning's flash and the thunder's roar, it looked as if guns would be jerked into play by the hands of hate.

But the cool old veteran on the wagon seat met the situation with the courageous calm which asks only an even break; a calm that corded Malabree's thick throat with rage while he rumbled:

"Git out!"

"Goin'," Barney drawled, still in that voice of irritating tranquillity. "But I'll be lookin' back till I'm outta gun range. An' I'll be on the watch fer—"

HE stopped abruptly as a noise, alien to Fiddle Basin, came drifting to his ears—the blatting of sheep. Malabree shifted his gaze suddenly to the direction from whence that sound was coming.

"Woollies," the latter mumbled, more to himself than to Barney. Then, striding quickly away to where a saddled horse stood tied at the corral, he mounted and spurred away up the creek.

Barney gaped open-mouthed. He gaped some more when, his attention drawn to a dust cloud rising from the south, he sighted two riders

streaking it to a spot upstream, the same place toward which Cadge Malabree was racing.

"Huh!" the elderly man gulped. "Now I wonder what the— Giddap, ponies!"

BARNEY allowed his lively little pair of buckskins to step out as the wagon wheeled rapidly up the road following the creek bank. Because of this, he arrived at the band of sheep almost at the same time as did the two riders from the lower part of the basin; excited riders whom the old band wagon driver now recognized as two of his regular customers, Ed Forbes and Sandy McCain.

"What's goin' on here?" Forbes was demanding of Cadge Malabree.

"Jest what I told yuh was goin' to go on," the latter retorted. "I told yuh that that doublecrossin' Jim Gardner was tradin' off his cattle fer sheep, and' fetchin' 'em into the basin here. An' now if yuh don't believe it, ask that herder there whose woollies these are!"

Old Barney did some more open-mouthed gaping as the Mexican herder declared:

"The sheep, they belong to Meester Gardner."

"Mebbe they do," snorted McCain, one of the smaller cattlemen. "But they ain't comin' onto this range."

"Well, what are we goin' to do about it?" Barney heard Malabree inquiring. "I'm buyin' a few head of cattle, same as you other little fellers. Are we goin' to let Jim Gardner sheep us out?"

"Not by a damn sight!" Ed Forbes expostulated. "Sandy an' me'll ride back to our range, round up a bunch of our neighbors and—"

"Hold on!" Malabree cut in sharply, pointing to old Barney, who had halted his wagon near the scene. "Mebbe we'd better not spill too much in front of that old buzzard, gents. He used to ride fer Jim Gardner, yuh know. They're very *dear* friends. Fact is, the old buzzard there might try to tip Gardner off that us little fellers is after 'im if—"

"How 'bout it, Barney?" Ed Forbes reined his horse close to the band wagon. "Are yuh still with Gardner —an' him bringin' sheep into the basin here?"

The old man hesitated, scratching his head thoughtfully.

"Well, to tell yuh the truth, Ed," he began, "I don't believe that Jim Gardner *would* buy sheep. He's a cowman to the core, an'—"

"See there!" Cadge Malabree yelled. "This herder ought to know who he's workin' fer! But still, ol' Denton's stickin' with his pal, Gardner—sheep or no sheep. An' he'll doublecross us jest like Gardner's doin' if we give him half a chancet!"

"Then we won't give him half a chancet," put in the other riled cattleman, Sandy McCain. "Pull yore wagon down there by the crick, Barney Denton. I'm goin' to unhook that team o' yore'n an' turn 'em loose!"

"Jest a minute now, Sandy," the old driver cautioned. "Yuh're lettin' this Malabree *hombre* git yuh all riled up. I may be drivin' a band wagon, but I'm still a cowpuncher at heart an'—"

"But yuh're Jim Gardner's best friend," Ed Forbes cut in. "Unhook his team, Sandy."

Old Barney was as hurt as he was angry to see his friends, McCain and Forbes, siding in with Cadge Malabree against him. Yet he realized that the sudden appearance of sheep in Fiddle Basin was causing their hot-headedness.

Therefore he showed no active hostility when McCain started unhooking the buckskins. Besides, the old man was trying to catch what was being said between Cadge Malabree and the Mexican sheepherder.

By straining his ears he managed to hear the Mexican saying that the sheep were to be delivered to the edge of Jim Gardner's range, Bunch Grass Swale, where the latter and some of his riders were to meet them.

"Damn sneak!" Ed Forbes grunted, but loud enough that Barney overheard. "He was too yeller to meet

his blattin' woolies here in the open country, where he knowed us fellers'd see him!"

By this time McCain was slipping the harness off the team of buckskins, and hazing them out into the hills across Fiddle Creek. When he returned he rode with Forbes and Malabree toward the lower part of the basin; leaving the nonplussed, frowning old Barney staring after them. Then the band of sheep began moving toward the upper basin, toward Bunch Grass Swale.

BARNEY didn't eat much supper that evening. The knowledge that trouble was going to break between now and midnight disturbed him, especially when he thought of his friend, Jim Gardner. Anxiously, hopefully, he peered through the deepening dusk at the open hills across the creek. If only—

A sudden elation came to the old man's eyes. The pair of buckskins that Sandy McCain had chased out upon open range were returning, nickering softly as they looked down upon the wagon standing on the willow-fringed bank of the stream.

"Come on, Flag! Here, Star!" old Barney called coaxingly as he raised the tarpaulin covering on the wagon box; and the two horses came trotting down the hillside to splash through the shallow stream.

"Huh!" Barney said, as he dumped generous portions of oats into the nosebags. "I figgered Sandy McCain was kinda overlookin' somethin' when he thought he could run you oat-lovin' ponies away from me at this time of evenin'—an' 'fore yuh'd had yore grain." Then, with the nosebags hooked over his arm, and with the team of eager horses trailing after him, he walked into a dense clump of willows.

Barney was glad, a few moments later, he had taken the precaution of concealing his team. While the animals were eating their oats, the clink of horseshoes sounded on the brushy trail on the opposite side of the creek. Barney ducked behind his wagon and waited, his eyes wide.

Soon a string of riders, traveling single file, came around the creek bend. Yet, though the watching man strained his eyes, he could recognize no one of them. It wasn't until the last of the six riders came into view that Barney's gnarled hands clenched tightly.

Dark as it was, there was no mistaking that last rider, that small, high-shouldered man who wore a flat-crowned hat, and whose boot heels twisted the stirrups in such a manner that his feet were at right angles to the sides of his mount.

"Swayne! Simon Swayne!" Though he uttered no sound, old Barney's lips formed the words.

Then wild thoughts raced through his mind. Cadge Malabree back in the basin. Simon Swayne, Malabree's old employer, also out of prison. So this was the line-up against Jim Gardner! And those six riders, armed to the hilt, were silently riding toward the Gardner range.

Old Barney swore softly as he limped toward the pair of buckskins.

"Come on, Flag," he said, removing the nosebag to slip the bridle on the off horse. "Neither you nor yore little playmate there's ever been straddled, but here's hopin' yuh'll fergit that mustang blood in yuh when I hop on."

It was the first time Barney had mounted a horse since he had lost his leg three years ago. Awkwardly balancing himself on the wagon tongue, he leaped and tried to swing his wooden leg across the snorting buckskin's back. But it was too much of a handicap—and the little horse, though the gentler of the team, didn't forget his mustang blood.

Surprised at the weight scrambling around on his back, and unable to see because of the blinds on the work bridle, he squealed, made a long jump forward, swapped ends—and hurled old Barney hard upon the ground.

"Ugh!" said the latter, struggling dazedly to a standing position. "Well, it looks like it's drive or stay where I am. An' I've *got* to travel."

Saying which, he hobbled away toward the harness piled on the doubletrees.

Barney threw all the heavy stuff out of his wagon before starting on his journey. Then, splashing through the creek, he urged his team up the slope beyond, heading over familiar territory for Jim Gardner's ranch, the W Diamond, which lay ten long miles to the northwest.

He wasn't following any road now; not even a trail. The light wagon was lurching over rocks and cactus, dipping into shallow gulches and sailing over the tops of low ridges like a phantom schooner drifting on a sea of sage. Yet always it headed northwest until, reaching the highest point on W Diamond range —Divide Ridge—Barney halted abruptly to stare at a line of flame banked against the sky, off to the west.

"Flag! Star!"

The old man yelled at his team, swerved down the hillside and hastened, unmindful of the wagon's dangerous tilt, toward that satanic glow illumining the crest of Hat Crown Butte. Far away, but still in the direction in which he was traveling, he thought he heard the almost indistinguishable crack of a gun.

The fire died down as he drew near his destination. Only a few sparks, rising to die in the night breeze, vied with the moonlight flooding the hills. Yet Barney remembered that shot he had heard. Instead of rumbling up to the scene in his wagon, he tied his team to a sagebrush and hobbled, as fast as his useless leg would permit, up the side of the draw in which he was leaving his outfit.

THE first thing that greeted the man's alert eyes, when he gained a view of the fire-blackened patch of range, was a group of eight hog-tied men being guarded by a squat individual who sat apart from them with a six-shooter in hand.

Barney recognized the guard as being Cadge Malabree. And, now, lying there crouched against a clump

Barney Denton

of sagebrush, he could hear the latter gloating:

"Purty slick, eh, Mr. Gardner? Us fellers settin' that grass fire so's to draw you an' these loyal punchers o' yore'n into a trap?"

"Yuh dirty sneak!" raged the helpless cattleman. "I smelled a rat when yuh come trailin' back into this basin. But I'll admit it was kinda a surprise when I bumped into yore jailbreakin' pard, Simon Swayne, out here with yuh tonight."

"Mebbe he ain't a jail-breaker," Barney heard Malabree sneer. "Mebbe a big feller with a lot o' influence —an' sheep—over on the head o' Swan River got a pardon fer Simon. Not that I'd be tellin' you an' yore dumb punchers that if I didn't know yuh was all goin' to be coyote bait 'fore mornin'. Smellin' up the air over 'round Bunch Grass Swale!"

"So that's it!" Gardner retorted, straining futilely at the ropes binding his hands and feet. "Now I git the idea. Alex Bront heard that my neighbors wanted me to run fer State Senator. He was afraid I might beat him outta the job an' got Swayne a pardon so the skunk could come back here an' put me outta the way!"

"An'," gloated the sneering Malabree, "at the same time put yore

little neighbors down the basin outta the way. They'll be ridin' into another trap purty soon. 'Fore daylight, this basin'll be sheep range. Then there'll be only one more score fer me to settle. I'll put a bullet through an ol' meddler they call Band Wagon Barney an'—"

"Start puttin' then!"

As he yelled that challenge, old Barney came to a standing position. Malabree whirled, ripped out an oath, and blazed away. But old Barney's .45 was spurting flames of hate that licked the night. And it was Cadge Malabree who, though having the advantage of first shot, stiffened, groaned and plunged forward into the group of W Diamond punchers he had been left to guard.

"Barney!"

"Comin', Jim, ol' boss!" And the old range veteran, a queer smile on his lined, leathery face, hobbled forward to cut the ropes binding Jim Gardner.

"But what the devil yuh doin' here?" Gardner asked while he helped free his riders. "Gol-lee! Talk 'bout glad to see anybody!"

"Did Swayne an' his pack o' wolves steal yore hosses, Jim?" Barney countered.

"Yeah. But never mind that. We'll hoof it back to the ranch an'—"

"Nope." Barney shook his grey head firmly. "There ain't time fer that, Jim. Hell's goin' to be poppin' over at Bunch Grass Swale purty shortly. A bunch o' yore friends, which think they're yore enemies now, is goin' to ride smack into a hornet's nest. Come on, fellers!" And the elderly man limped back toward the draw from whence he had come.

AN hour later, back on the Fiddle Creek road again, Barney was racing his team of buckskins toward Bunch Grass Swale where a band of sheep, a patch of grey in the moonlight, were bedded down.

Off to the south, and parallel with the wagon, a group of horsemen were also sweeping along toward Barney's destination. Barney knew that those riders were Ed Forbes, Sandy McCain and the other "little fellers" from the lower part of the basin range; angered, excited—and riding hell-bent into the yawning jaws of a death trap.

"Flag! Star!" the old driver yelled at his team.

But try as he might, the bunch of horsemen was gaining on him. Over the crest of the ridge they swept. Then guns began to shatter the night silence. Harder than ever now old Barney urged his galloping team along. Yet, when he topped the rise overlooking the swale, he saw that the trap set by Simon Swayne had been sprung.

Two of the cattlemen had sprawled from their saddles, and the remainder of them were being surrounded by the six men who had stolen Jim Gardner's horses.

Although it was risky business to approach Swayne's men and their prisoners, old Barney, having pulled his team down to their customary jog trot, drove steadily on. He heard the surprised voices of the betrayed cattlemen rising irefully; heard them cursing Swayne and Malabree; heard them demanding to know where Jim Gardner was, and heard Swayne's nasal voice, gloating with triumph, saying:

"Never mind where Gardner is, yuh dumb cowpunchers. But I'll take care o' the skunk that sent me to the pen, so good that it'll look like *you* took care o' him—an' that he took care o' you. All yore carcasses'll be piled up here in this swale 'fore mornin'!" He turned to train glittering eyes on old Barney who was pulling his team to a halt. "An' to top it all off, here's the old chromo that helped Gardner send me to the pen. Well, ain't that nice now?"

"Gosh!" blurted Sandy McCain, the man who had turned Barney's team loose earlier in the evening. "I shore wish now I'd let yuh drive on to Gardner's place. This whole thing is a frame-up, Barney. Them ain't Gardner's sheep. They're—"

"Dry up!" the exultant Swayne commanded sharply. Then, to his henchmen: "Herd 'em off down into

that draw there, fellers, an' start pumpin' 'em fulla hot lead. I'll do the same to this old buzzard perched on his band wagon!"

"All right, Jim!"

As Barney yelled those words, Jim Gardner and his seven riders leaped out from under the tarpaulin that had covered the wagon box. And in their hands, shiny new barrels glinting in the moonlight, were guns that their owner carried in his band wagon stock.

A gasp that ended in a chorus of groans from Swayne and his confederates greeted this sudden magical appearance. Yet only one of the outlaws was panicked into whipping his gun about. And Slim Wells, a W Diamond rider, deftly bored him with a lead slug from a brand new .30-30 carbine.

"Well," casually inquired old Barney of the gaping-mouthed outlaws, "any the rest o' the wolf pack achin' to bare their fangs, now that the tables 'a' been turned? How 'bout you, Mr. Swayne? Even in the moonlight, I kin see yuh're kinda pale around the gills. Is the smell o' gunpowder—an' prison bars—kinda stickin' in yore throat?"

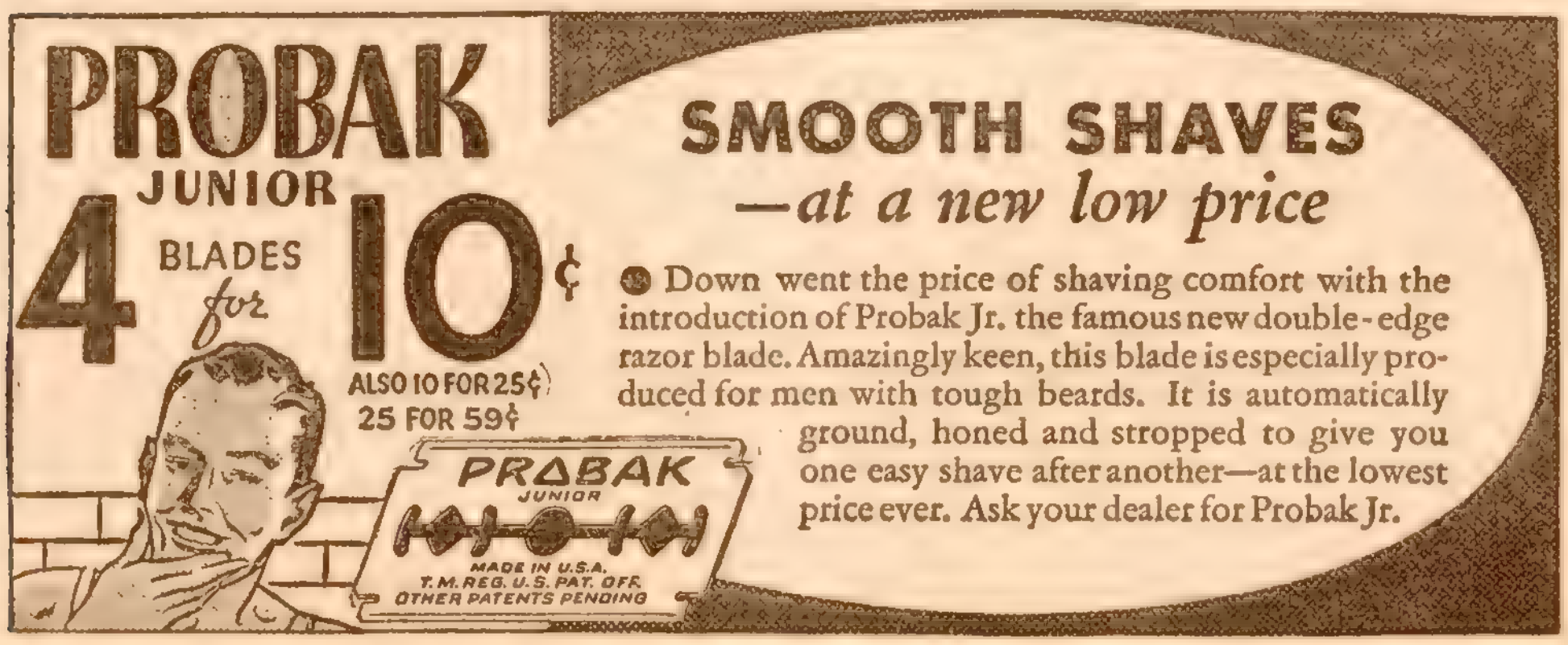
"Malabree!" The frozen-faced Swayne choked the word out. "Where's—Malabree?"

"Gone," Jim Gardner replied, grinning at his neighbors from down the basin. Then the smile vanished and a strange huskiness came into his voice as he added softly:

"Most angels wear wings, they tell me. But it was one that wears a smile—an' a peg leg—that ended Cadge Malabree's crooked trail." He strode over to take old Barney's hand in a crushing grip. "Nor he don't drive a golden chariot, gents. He drives a band wagon."

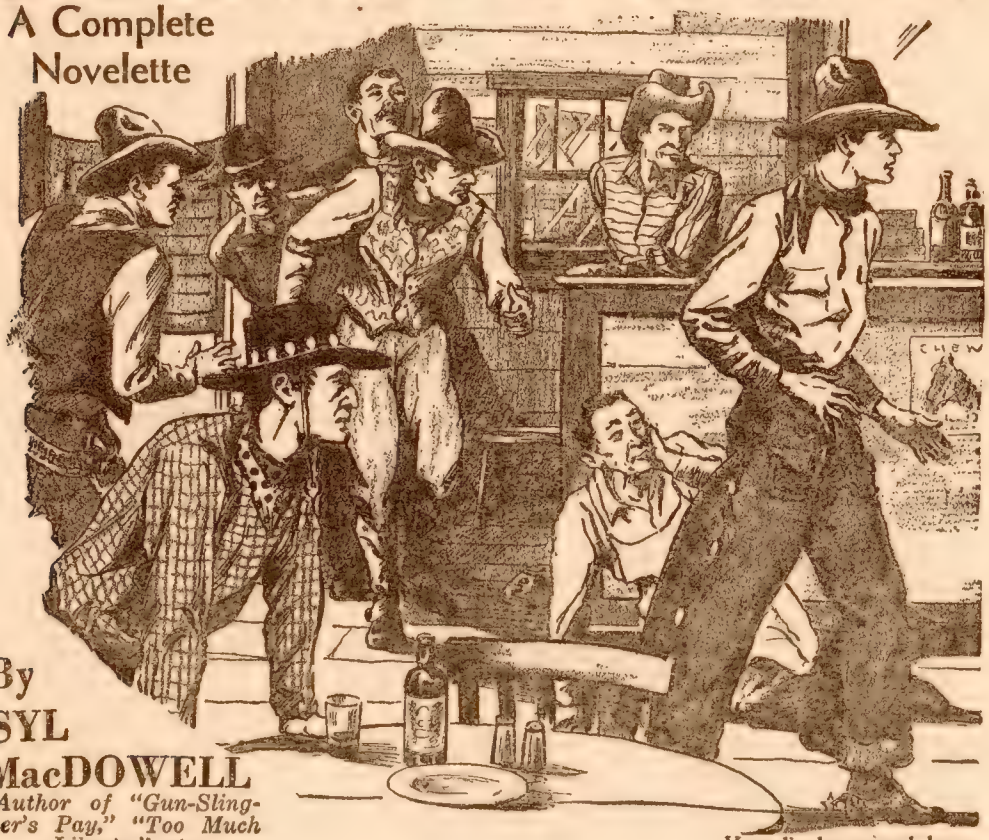
NEXT MONTH

MESA OF BRANDED SKULLS, a Rip-Snorting Novel of Range War by Grant Taylor — RANGER'S SHOWDOWN, a Gripping Novelette by Westmorcland Gray — and Many Other Stories Packed with Bang-Up Action!



HANG-TOWN

A Complete Novelette



By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Gun-Slinger's Pay," "Too Much Liberty," etc.

Vogel's log-sized legs

CHAPTER I

Bullets for Breakfast

PAYDAY PARKER had made night-camp in the ruins of an old adobe and he awoke with the doleful dawn-song of a distant coyote in his ears.

He peeled back his blanket, rose, stretched thoroughly and then began to kindle a fire with fine, brittle juniper twigs.

The shrill, thin yipping came again. Then the soft, greeting nicker of a horse, and Payday felt its soft muzzle touch his shoulder. He turned and grinned faintly at his little palomino that had come the length of his picket rope.

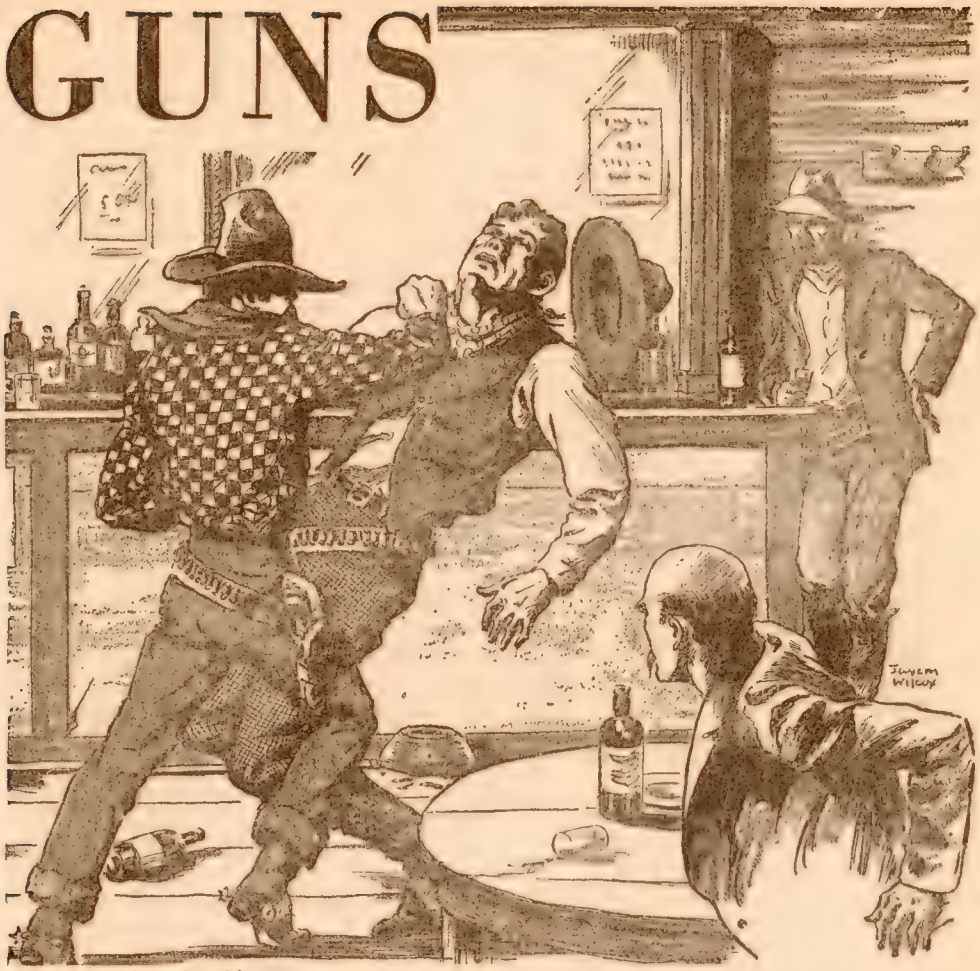
"Howdy, pardner," he said.

The thin-haired horse shivered. Payday picked up his blanket and threw it across the palomino's back.

"Cold or skeered?" Payday inquired genially. "Sometimes I figger yuh're spooky about coyotes. Yuh remember what the Shoshones say? Well, suh, when the world was mighty young, the sun rose up out of a hole in the ground. *Senor* Coyote, he didn't like the sun. Tired from an all-night hunt, he was, most always. So he reckoned it'd be a smart idea tuh set down on that hole

A Bullet from Ambush Plunges Payday Parker

GUNS



telescoped under him

and keep it dark all day so he could sleep good. But the sun come up and branded him right distressful. So ever since, *Senor* Coyote, he howls at daybreak."

The juniper twigs crackled with yellow flame. Payday squatted, heaped on more fuel, then drew from his vest a tobacco sack filled with coffee. He dropped it into a blackened tin can, filled the can from his saddle canteen, then set it on an adobe brick beside the blaze.

The coyote's lonely, dismal cry came again. But it chopped off short, with a note of alarm. The palamino turned, ears alert. Payday came erect, eyes suddenly narrowed, peering through the half-light toward a shadowy mesquite clump.

He saw nothing. But he heard the metallic jingle of bit-chains and, mingled with it, he was almost sure, the sinister click of a six-gun. Someone cocking a single-action Colt.

There followed an instant of tense silence. Payday stepped cautiously back from the revealing rim of firelight. Then the dawn silence was shattered by the roar of powder, and gun lightning forked out from the mesquite.

The bullet struck the adobe brick, shattering it. The palomino snorted

and leaped. Payday's trail breakfast sloshed sizzlingly into the fire, instantly dimming it. Payday threw himself flat, one hand stabbing out for his holster and gun belt, which lay beside his saddle, two strides from where the fire billowed savory steam which hid him from yonder bushwhacker. Payday's .45 leveled across the saddle, muzzle groping hungrily for some revealing motion off there in the mesquite.

He waited, motionless, while the dragging seconds brought an amber glow over the rolling desert. Once he heard the bit chains again and the creak of leather. He pressed an ear to the ground. There came the ground-echo of hoofs, urged into a swift walk.

Was his would-be killer retreating? Payday raised his head, keen eyes piercing the screen of steamy smoke. He saw nothing. Only that thorny, concealing barrier of the mesquite thicket.

He scrambled to his feet, then, and in a swift crouching run circled the old adobe and halted at the edge of a crumbling, sheltering wall. He was in time to see a rider crossing a rise a hundred yards to the south. Only a glimpse, it was, as the rider vanished. But enough for Payday to receive an indelible impression of a man with sloping, bottleneck shoulders surmounted by a peak-crowned hat, extraordinarily wide-brimmed.

PAYDAY dashed back to his camp spot and saddle, jaws knotted in cold anger. He was grimly resolved to solve the mystery of this dawn ambush, in quick pursuit. But as he gripped his kak, to toss it onto the back of the restless palomino, scattered remnants of the bullet-broken adobe brick arrested his move.

It was broad daylight now. Bright enough for him to see ominous fragments of bone and something that glinted dully. He dropped the saddle and squatted, gathering the gruesome find into the palm of his hand.

Men who wander desert trails soon come to recognize particles of a human skeleton. Here were the hand bones of someone long dead. Earth-stained joints, long sealed up in the sun-dried clay. Grisly clue to some hidden crime of the past.

Still clinging to a piece of the adobe brick, as though it had been gripped in the death-clutch of the unknown victim, was a gold nugget almost as large as a Colt slug.

Payday scrutinized his find briefly. Then he removed his black neckerchief. Carefully he wrapped nugget and bones and placed them in an inner pocket of his vest.

Three minutes later the palomino was under leather and Payday halted for a hurried survey of the mesquite clump. He found tracks of a horse with a new left front shoe. He trailed it to the rise where he had glimpsed that rider cross.

The sign ended here in granite underfooting. Payday topped the rise. Beyond was a broken wilderness of arroyos which sloped sharply to a narrow valley zigzagged with the tree-green of a river, nearly dry. The man he sought was hidden somewhere in the thousand steep-banked washes that slashed the harsh land.

Payday reined into one of these, and when the sun burst in splendor over the far-off rim of the Vinegaroon Range, he had reached the river.

There were fish feeding in a shallow riffle, heads upstream. Payday plucked a long hair from the palomino's mane and tied it in a slip-loop. He found a spot where a tangle of exposed alamo roots overhung the water. He crawled out on these, agile and intent as a stalking panther. He dangled the horsehair loop deftly, sinking it in the slow current. A few moments later he flipped a struggling, gilled whiting out onto the bank.

The palomino watched him curiously as he dressed the fish and kindled another tiny fire.

A half hour more, and they were on the move again. Two miles downstream they came onto the tracks with the new left front shoe. Payday urged the horse to a faster gait, and loosened the .45 that weighted his holster. His grey eyes, slitted half shut, scanned the banks ahead as he rode.

Toward noon, the tracks left the open sand and forded the stream. Payday followed. In the opposite shallows, the mud had not yet settled in the hoof imprints. The peak-hatted rider was close ahead now.

They hit a dim trail. To a tree trunk was nailed a weather-beaten sign, pointing like a finger. Burned on it was a brand—V-Bar-O. Scrawled crudely underneath with the hot iron was:

Hang-town, 6 Miles South
Hell, 6 Foot Underground

Past the trees, the trail led up toward a barren, open mesa, and the tracks of the fugitive, still wet from the ford, followed it. The sun was high and intensely hot. Payday's haste ended now. He alighted, dropped his reins. Squatting in the shade under the sign, he leisurely built himself a smoke.

"Reckon we know where at tuh find our *hombre* now," he told the palomino. "Mebbeso he don't know it yet, but he's headed for both destinations."

CHAPTER II

Hangtown—and Hell

IT was siesta hour when Sim Vogel swaggered into the Hang-town Saloon. The bartender, Mott Mavity, was outstretched on the bar, snoring. Slim slapped his high-peaked *sombrero* down on the sleeper's face.

Mavity gave a croak of alarm and struggled up, clawing at the hat. Sim Vogel was pouring a drink, a snaggle-toothed grin on his coarse, red face.

Mavity blinked.

"That message from Hilary Neal—it was correct, then?"

Sim Vogel tossed down a jolt of rye and banged the glass back on the bar. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Neal, he was only half correct," he declared. "It was Parker, all right. That part was correct. But old Neal let on as how Parker was a dangerous triggerman. That part was wrong."

"How come?"

Sim Vogel chuckled and slapped his holster.

"Him and me come tuhgether up at Laguna. That makes two dead men up at the old adobe, Parker an'—"

Mavity slid from the bar with a warning hiss. He was a little man with pale eyebrows that had a trick of shooting halfway up his low, close-lipped forehead. He gripped Sim Vogel's arm.

"Yuh talk too much an' yuh shoot too quick!" he whispered hoarsely. "Don't ferget there's a heap o' folks around here who still're wonderin' what happened tuh Jake Melody! Melody's friends are hankerin' for some excuse tuh stretch a rope over a tree limb!"

Sim Vogel brushed Mavity's hold from his arm and shrugged his bottleneck shoulders.

"Yuh're just a skittish old woman," he stated as he poured another brimming drink. "If yuh had any get-up, yuh'd of learnt where at Jake Melody stashed his gold."

"That I would," Mavity insisted, "if yuh hadn't got over-eager with yore shootin' iron an'—an'—"

Sim Vogel jerked back his head and swallowed another rye. His leering grin widened.

"Quicker money than hazin' cows through the cactus. Safer, too. I'll find old Melody's nuggets yet. Might of t'day if that gun-slinger, Parker, hadn't pilgrimed down from the Vinegaroons."

Mavity's eyebrows worked agitatedly. He fingered his scrawny throat as though he already felt rope-burns on it.

"Hi-jackin', that's a reasonable enterprise," he declared. "But murder, that's—"

The saloon doors squeaked. Both men started nervously and spun around, facing the street. No one was there.

A dry gust moved the complaining door hinges. Sim Vogel grunted a laugh.

"Jake Melody's ghost, mebbe," he said.

Mavity's eyebrows danced and his pale eyes widened.

"Who knows?" he blurted. He poured rye for himself and shuddered as he bolted it down. He pressed a shaky finger to Vogel's shirtfront. "Yuh ain't the sort tuh believe it, Sim. But some men don't quit fightin' after they're dead. And sometimes I'm thinkin' Jake Melody was one o' that kind!"

LATE afternoon brought a straggle of customers to the Hang-town Bar. They found Mavity behind the mahogany in a soiled white apron. Sim Vogel stood swayingly at the customer side, a half-empty bottle in front of him.

One of the later arrivals was a young, even-featured man with amiable brown eyes. He wore rusty, bullhide chaps with the Circle Y brand burned in the wide flaps. He greeted Mavity and some others but the amiability left his eyes when they came to rest on Sim Vogel. He came slowly to the bar.

"That east boundary fence is down again," he said, his voice brittle. "And my late range is fed over with V-Bar-O cows."

Vogel turned, his eyes taking note of the fact that Tom Yates wore no gun around his lean, young middle.

"Tell yore old man that thirty dollars a month hires a line rider," croaked Vogel.

"It takes more'n thirty dollars tuh keep him straight," Tom Yates stated flatly. "And less, sometimes, tuh make a line rider crooked."

The shade of Vogel's face deepened. He put his back to the bar, elbows propped on it, gun hand dangling close to his gun butt.

"Meanin' yuh hire 'em and they work for me, is that it?"

"If I could prove it, I'd say it," Yates answered.

Vogel exploded a curse and his hand went for hardware. The others in the room dodged back, flattening themselves against the wall. Mavity gave a warning cry and plunged a hand across the bar to stay Vogel's draw. He missed. Vogel's gun came level with Yates' ribs. They were ten feet apart and young Yates did not flinch, but his eyes already had the look of a man that was gazing into the beyond.

In the fraction of an instant that it took for Vogel's thick hand to tighten around the grip, the batwing doors squeaked again. But this time it was not the stir of a vagrant desert wind that moved them.

They parted wide enough to admit a man who was lean from long riding and meager fare.

Before they could close again, the glassware behind the bar jangled to the thudding roar of a .45. For a stunned instant it seemed that Vogel's gun had spoken. For it leaped as though from recoil. It leaped from his hand and banged on the floor at his feet. The onlookers saw Vogel staring at a gory bullet crease across the back of his gun hand.

And then they saw Payday Parker. No one had glimpsed the rattler swiftness of his draw. Nor did they see him holster his gun. Yet from the thonged leather at his hip, a thin wisp of smoke trickled, even as blood trickled from Vogel's hand and dripped to his fallen Colt.

And now, with a gesture so slowly deliberate as to seem almost careless, Parker strode past young Yates. With a scornful, scooping motion of his spurred boot he sent Vogel's gun hurtling out under the saloon doors and into the street.

Vogel lurched around, hugging the bar, gripping his hurt hand. Mavity, new agitation in his restless eyebrows, ripped a strip from his apron and with deft fingers bound the big man's hand. Then he tilted the half-emptied rye bottle, soaking the emergency bandage in the crude, stinging antiseptic of the frontier.

Vogel's curses became a pained roar. He slapped out with his heavy left hand and Mavity went down.

A buzz of angry protest rose from the onlookers, who until now had been silent as wooden men. Their voices seemed to intensify Vogel's rage. He grasped the rye bottle, whirled around, and swung a killing blow at Payday's head.

Payday ducked as the ugly missile

grazed his ear. He straightened with the whiplash power of tough, young ashwood. He gripped Vogel's wrist. His free fist jolted to the point of Vogel's jaw.

No more than a foot did that blow travel. But it snapped the big man's head back as though jerked by a hangman's noose. Vogel's log-sized legs telescoped under him and with a grunt he went down in a heap.

It was a startling variation from the aimless brawls that the Hang-town Saloon had seen in times agone. And to the onlookers, still pressed to the far wall, it was plain that this lean, brown stranger was no pilgrim. He had appeared suddenly, apparently from nowhere. And it was plain that he was a master of quick decision and quicker action.

The sigh of released tension that came was a tribute to his skilled feat with gun and fist.

Then Mavity bobbed up behind the bar, one hand pressed to a crimson splotch on his cheek where Vogel had struck. On Mavity's face was a hatred no man had ever seen before. The sliding eyebrows for once were stationary, lowered in a single, even line of hate above his smoldering eyes.

Whatever the sinister secret between him and the humbled Vogel, the bond that held them together was broken now for all time.

CHAPTER III

Ugly Evidence

TUMBLING upward, Sim Vogel hauled himself to wobbly erectness. His jaws worked as pain flowed into the numbed nerve ends. He pawed for the rye bottle that Payday had set back on the bar.

Mavity snatched it from him, with a wordless growl. The eyes of the two men locked, and stormy accusations might have come then, revealing their ghoulish alliance, had not young Yates come forward and clamped a hand on Payday's shoulder.

"Ain't much a man can say," he stated quietly. "Nothin' except I'm everlastin'ly obliged, stranger."

A vague smile touched Payday's mouth corners. He glanced significantly at the other's gunless hips.

"Correctin' other folks' mistakes sometimes is a pleasure, suh," he drawled. "It cost me nothing."

"Neither does this," declared Mavity, sliding the rye and a glass in front of Payday.

Yates slapped a coin on the bar. He jerked his head toward the neutrals by the wall.

"Drink up, ever'body," he invited.

They sidled toward the bar. Vogel straightened and zigzagged toward a poker table in a far corner, where he slumped into a chair.

"Me, I'm pertickler who I drink with," he mumbled drunkenly.

Yates spun.

"Meanin' what?" he rasped. "An' who?"

Vogel leered unpleasantly across his bandaged hand, his eyes challenging Payday.

"Tell 'em, *Tejano*. Tell 'em who y'are an' where yuh come from. An' why."

Payday was pouring and seemed to be deliberating his answer. Yates spoke up in quick defense:

"He's a Circle Y hand. Providin' he wants a job. Ridin' the V-Bar-O boundary fence."

Vogel barked a scornful laugh.

"For thirty a month, huh? Hell, this *hombre* drawed five hundred for a month's work up at Los Banos. He drawed two thousand for a gun job in the Vinegaroons. He's loaded down with blood money. That's why—"

"Yuh're a most miserable liar," Payday announced matter-of-factly. "Right now, I couldn't buy a pair o' chaps for a doodlebug. Not unless—"

He paused and delved a hand inside his vest. He reached into the grisly bundle wrapped in his neckerchief. He found the nugget and rolled it out on the bar.

The simple act had an effect that sent a chill of apprehension through him. Mavity's eyes started from his head. From Yates came an explosive: "Hell a-mighty!" Suspicion darkened

the faces of the others as they stared at the glittering hunk of metal. Their glasses, upraised, settled back onto the bar, untasted.

A long, awkward silence. Then Mavity spoke, slightly hoarse:

"Talk up, stranger!"

"Talk like yuh shoot—fast an' straight!" Yates added. The friendliness had faded from his face.

Payday's mouth went obstinate. A little splash of color flamed where the muscles knotted his jaws. He lifted his glass from the bar, and with insulting deliberateness poured the contents onto the floor.

The sudden tenseness in the place penetrated even Sim Vogel's fogged senses. He pushed himself up from the table and careened to the group at the bar. He saw the nugget and his bloodshot eyes widened with swift desperation. Payday reached for the nugget. Vogel shouldered him aside and crowded between.

"I told yuh this *Tejano* ain't int'rested none in a thirty-a-month saddle job," he announced at large. Then to Payday: "S'pose yuh tell us what yuh done tuh Jake Melody!"

Vogel feared no violence now from Payday's hands. The emotion of the crowd had undergone a swift, magical change. They were with him. And slowly, threateningly, they were closing in around the stranger, hemming him in.

Payday's thoughts flitted back to that danger moment at dawn, when the ambushed gun flamed out from the mesquite, shattering the adobe brick and revealing its strange contents. He remembered that flitting glimpse of the rider crossing the rise and he noted now, with complete recognition, Vogel's sloping, bottleneck shoulders.

There was a mystery here—some dark tale of an earlier ambush. A mystery of greed and treachery and death. Vogel could explain it. But now was not the time to wrest the truth from the man. Hang-town was distrustful of strangers. It was an undercurrent that ran deep. It would take more than words to shift suspicion from himself to the gloating Vogel.

But one man in that tense, hard-faced gathering was in sympathy with Payday, who had an uncanny intuition in such matters. That man was the bartender, Mavity. This was another angle to the mystery. What did Mavity know? And what fear sealed his lips now?

Again Payday made a lightning decision. And he acted as swiftly as he had, a few moments before, when he strode into the Hang-town Saloon.

With a sweeping swing, he brought one fist with cracking impact against the side of Vogel's burly neck. In the same motion, he jabbed backward with an elbow that caught Yates squarely in the middle. He leaped backward, bowling away two men as his spurs raked their shins.

All at once he was standing alone, in the middle of the floor. His gun, at his level, menaced the dazed group as he backed toward the door.

"Me, I don't linger nowhere long," he told them. "But this is one place I aim tuh come back to. Someday soon, yuh pore, misguided galoots'll know who tuh take sides with."

"Hold on, you!" rasped Vogel, pushing away from the bar.

Payday's muzzle swung on him.

"This here is a hair-trigger gun," Payday warned him. "It ain't always easy tuh bark a man's knuckles instead o' borin' him through!"

VOGEL stepped back. Payday's shoulders touched the doors. They swung open, then closed. And he was gone.

The town was quiet. It was quiet, too, inside the Hang-town Saloon until the rapid beat of the palamino's hoofs died away in the distance. Then Vogel was one of the first to surge outside.

Long evening shadows lay across the street and the few, low weather-beaten buildings. At the edge of the sidewalk Vogel found his gun. He found something besides. It was a bundled neckerchief. And when he fumbled it open and examined the contents, a deathly pallor spread over his veined face.

He swore again and hastily hid the

telltale evidence inside his shirtfront and went back inside the bar. A few citizens lingered there.

"He's a pay-gun, that jasper is. Me, I can prove—" Vogel began to bluster.

"But he didn't collect," Mavity's icy voice interrupted him.

The bartender was fingering the nugget that still lay on the bar. In his eyes was a somber reflection that brought no comfort to the big, bottle-shouldered man who until so recently had been his ally.

PAYDAY rode until dark and again reached the river crossing. There he alighted and laid a hand on the warm, sweat-moist neck of his jaded palomino.

"We don't seem tuh take root easy, do we, pardner?" he said. "No matter how peaceful our intentions, trouble rises up wherever we roam." He slipped the picket rope from the saddle rigging and knotted it around the animal's neck. He lifted a stirrup and tugged the latigo loose and lifted the saddle.

"What's more," he declared to the horse, "we're stayin' on the trouble trail for a while. Until we find out what become o' Jake Melody."

Payday made dark camp on the river bottom. He was empty to the point of weakness, but weary, too, so sleep soon came. As he dozed into that half-world between sleep and waking, a yellow moon tipped a hilltop. A vague shadow was silhouetted against the rising orb. A coyote raised a weird, lonely cry as he started out on his eternal night's hunt.

The palomino drew close to the blanketed form of the man on the ground.

Payday was up at dawn. He shot a young antelope that had come down from the hills to water. He dressed it and packed the carcass behind his saddle. He retraced his trail of the day before and late in the morning reached the tumbledown adobe on the mesa—the place that Vogel knew as Laguna.

He hung the antelope carcass in the mesquite, cut off generous steaks and feasted. He slept, then, in the shade of the crumbling wall of the old house.

It was a game of wait now.

Sooner or later, Sim Vogel would come. Payday knew that it was the habit of skulking killers to return to the scene of their crime. Besides, there was the urge of that grim souvenir which Payday had left back in Hang-town, beside Vogel's gun.

CHAPTER IV

Goad of Guilt

BRIEF had been Payday's appearance in Hang-town. But it was stormy and dramatic enough to leave a lasting impression. An impression that made the group in Mavity's place reluctant to form a posse to give chase.

"A Tumble-T rider come down two-three days ago tuh the V-Bar-O, which is how I learnt that Parker is a hired killer. Which makes it plain that he dry-gulched old Melody," argued Vogel. "He ought tuh be stamped out like a rattler. He's poison clear through."

"What for did he crack down on yuh?" someone inquired.

"Just plain cussedness."

"Yuh're better at pullin' fence staples than a trigger," declared Mavity. "Just like Yates said."

"Yuh're sayin' that on account o' that wallop I give yuh, Mavity," said Vogel. "Yuh ought tuh make allowance for a gent when he's had a drink too many in the heat o' the day."

"Figger it out yore own way, Sim."

Vogel left the Hang-town Saloon in a dark mood. The job of getting rid of Payday Parker was strictly up to him, it was evident. And from all appearances, it was a job that was going to call for all the cunning at the big man's command.

He returned that night to his V-Bar-B spread. He allowed two days for his gun hand to heal. They were days filled with suspense and growing fear. The lean, brown *Tejano* was a man of lasting determination.

It wasn't likely that he intended to give up the mission he had chosen as a result of stumbling, by evil chance, on the bones at the old adobe.

It was a secret that Vogel much preferred to remain buried.

Unable to endure the goad of a troubled conscience, on the third day Vogel rode out from the V-Bar-O.

At almost the same hour, young Yates, in whose thoughts memory of the stranger rankled, rode out from the Circle Y.

The route of them both led toward the Laguna adobe. It was near this spot that the boundary of the two ranges lay. Which was the focal point of the fence-trouble between the two outfits.

The old adobe had been a landmark in the region for many years. Up until recent weeks it had been the abode of Jake Melody, a desert rat whose eternal search for a rich claim had become the subject of jest and good-natured ridicule among Hang-town ranchers. But for all their jests, there had come a time when Melody began to pay his bills at Mavity's place with raw gold.

Shortly thereafter, the prospector vanished.

It was not a country that a man would leave once he had struck pay-dirt. The suspicion had spread that Jake Melody had met with foul play. That was one of the reasons that strangers were looked at askance in Hang-town.

Until the time of Payday's appearance, there had been no clue to Melody's fate. That nugget, flung so heedlessly on Mavity's bar, was the thing that fanned the community's smoldering suspicions into a hot glow of accusation.

Yates reached the boundary fence, examined the recently-repaired breaks in it, assured himself that no V-Bar-O cows were on Circle Y grass, then detoured on his route home toward the Laguna adobe. There was a small *cienaga,* or spring, there. He figured to leave his horse on noon water while he siestaed until a cooler hour for riding back to his home spread.

At the *cienaga,* Yates unsaddled and hobbled his horse. He squatted in the shade and ate a meager lunch from his saddlebags, then, after the custom of the country, spread his poncho and slept through the heat of midday.

The *cienaga* was several hundred yards from the adobe, and hidden from it by the fringe of mesquite in which Vogel, several days before, had ambushed himself. Though out of view from the house, it was within hearing. For when Yates awakened, late in the afternoon, he heard sounds—a muffled thumping.

AT first he believed it was some range cow, pawing in a dust hole. But the sound continued, in regular rhythm. A human sound. The sound of a man at work, digging. It came from the direction of the adobe.

Yates rose and with drawn gun approached to the rim of the mesquite. Then he saw the man who had saved his life at the Hang-town Saloon.

Payday Parker was engaged in a task that mystified the watching Yates. Armed with a thick, heavy length of green mesquite, he was battering down an angle of an adobe wall. One side of the old *casa* already was leveled to the foundations. From time to time Payday halted in his labors, squatted and examined the dusty ruins. He was so concentrated in separating small, bleached fragments from the broken wall that he was oblivious of the spectator in the mesquite, a gunshot away.

Yates was on the point of emerging into the open and demanding a showdown when he became aware that someone else was watching the stranger. He saw the blurred, moving shadow of a man, behind the bright green of a mesquite thicket some distance to his right.

The slanting shadow was plain on the sand. And Yates was quick to recognize it. It was the outline of a man in a high-peaked *sombrero.* A man with crouching, bottleneck shoulders.

Like a stalking panther, Sim Vogel was ominously intent on that solitary laborer in the ruins.

As Yates watched him, he saw the shadow extend. Across the sand, then, in front of the mesquite, appeared the sharp silhouette of an extended arm—and an aimed gun!

Vogel was taking slow, deliberate aim. Leaden vengeance, cold-blooded murder, was about to be enacted before young Yates' eyes.

It was no time to hesitate. Yates had faltered at Mavity's place, when the mantle of suspicion fell on the stranger. But he made a swift decision now. Whatever Payday Parker had done, whatever his past had been, Yates owed him a debt. A blood debt, which could be wiped out by a gun, and a gun only.

He recollected Payday's last words at Mavity's place:

"Someday soon, yuh pore, misguided galoots'll know who tuh take sides with!"

Yates raised his gun, took quick aim at that blurred, indefinite target half-hidden back of the mesquite, and fired.

The report of his gun shattered the eternal silence of the lonely *cienaga*, and even as the smoke puff belched from his muzzle, his target leaped, stumbled, then turned and scuttled for heavier cover.

The shot was a signal that sent Payday flat in back of the low, remaining portion of wall where he toiled. As he vanished, his six-gun glinted from a gap in his stronghold. Yates did not see it. He was too intent on the retreating Vogel, whom he glimpsed, in vague intervals, penetrating deeper into the thorny thickets.

Here was a three-cornered siege, a tangle of acts and motives which could produce a swift tragedy of error. Yates, on his feet now and dodging back to gain a clearer view of the vanishing Vogel, exposed himself for the fraction of a second to Payday's aim.

From the fissure in the wall, Payday's Colt slammed death toward Yates, whom he was convinced had fired on him.

Yates went down from the paralyzing impact of a .45 slug, high in the left shoulder. He was raising himself to a sitting position as Payday came across the open, six-gun steady at his waist.

"One move, Mister Man, an' it's yore last!" Payday rasped from tense, harsh lips. "Ain't there a man in this buzzard's country who fight's honest?"

"Yuh're loco!" groaned Yates. "Duck for cover, yuh—"

FROM somewhere back in the mesquite, a .45 spoke and the sand in front of the advancing Payday geysered.

Payday leaped sidewise as a second shot sent a slug through his Stetson brim. He dropped down, bellied out like a lizard and wriggled for the intervening ten yards to the nearest thicket. The stillness seemed intense now. The death-song of six-guns had silenced the evening stir of life in the vicinity of the waterhole.

"It's Vogel back there!" Yates said through clenched teeth. "I pinked him while he beaded on yuh!"

Payday's slitted eyes rounded. There was relief in his reply:

"It shore seemed onreasonable yuh'd be bushwhackin', Yates. Somethin' told me tuh up that shot, sort of."

Yates attempted a game grin that ended in a grimace of pain.

"Anyhow, we're even up, you an' me."

"We're both standin' against Sim Vogel, is that it?"

"If I only knew where *you* stood, Parker—"

"I wasn't sure my ownself. Till I prodded around in that old adobe."

Yates fought back the pain that gripped his shoulder.

"Tell a man what yore play is," he pleaded helplessly.

"I found Jake Melody. What's left o' him."

"Good Lord! I'm mighty int'rested!"

"So is Vogel. It's an easy guess why. Git yoreself better hid, Yates. He ain't likely tuh quit now. This is a finish showdown. It's him or us that rides away from here."

Yates got up and started for cover. He had taken but three faltering

steps when the bang of a Colt, back in the thicket, crumpled him. He scrambled frantically the rest of the way, one leg dragging, a blood trickle from his right thigh wetting the sand.

The gun sound brought Payday to his feet and he flitted through the dense growth, reckless of the mesquite thorns that clawed restrainingly at him. He made toward Vogel's lurking spot. It was a death duel now.

CHAPTER V

Fangs of Fire

THE mesquite thicket was laced with countless labyrinthian lanes. Payday knew Vogel's approximate position. His strategy was to conceal his own whereabouts. After a brief burst of speed he flung himself down and waited, listening, watching.

The sun sank lower; the shadows deepened to phantomish masses. Payday calculated that Vogel was ambushed close. The first man to make a betraying move in the open would pay forfeit.

If dark came before the final, lethal clash, then blundering luck would take a hand in the game.

Payday preferred to leave luck out of it. Gun-slinging, for him, was an exact science. He had lived by the quickness of eye and hand, and by a score of ruses which were a part of this grim profession. It was a ruse he decided on as the crimson shafts of a desert sunset cast a lingering glow across the sky.

He drew a .45 cartridge from his belt. He scraped away with his hand a bare spot in the dead leaves where he lay. He gouged out a depression in the sand and built in it a criss-crossed heap of small, dry twigs. Tilting his hat over the heap, he touched a match to it. As the flames took hold, he placed the cartridge on the fire.

He snaked away from the spot, then, avoiding any telltale sound as he went. Thirty feet off, he halted again in a dense, low bower of branches. He waited tensely for a few minutes. Once again the evening stillness was awakened by a report.

The heated primer had exploded back there, on that palm-sized patch of embers.

The ruse succeeded. The phantom shot was followed, after a second's interval, by a four-shot volley a rope throw to his left.

Sim Vogel was throwing lead at that spot where he thought his enemy lurked. Payday could see the flash of the other's gun. But a screen of branches and leaves lay between. He started his silent stalking again to find an opening through which he could send a six-gun message, sure and certain.

He found a place he sought and stopped again. Seconds dragged past. He heard a movement—the rustle of dry leaves and the tiny snap of a twig. Directly in front of him, it seemed to be. His eyes ached from this wracking vigil. He might have chanced shooting at the sound. But if he missed, his own gun-flash would betray his position.

Presently the sharp, acrid smell of smoke came to his nostrils. It was not powder smoke. It was the unmistakable, spicy odor of burning mesquite. He raised his head, craned around, and the leap of flames greeted him.

The exploding cartridge had sent embers flying into the tinder-dry undergrowth!

Payday hugged close to the earth. The flames grew. He heard them snap and crackle now. They were climbing higher and sending a weird radiance through the thicket. He kept his eye fixed on the spot whence the betraying sounds had come.

He did not have long to wait. The crackle became a roar, and a sheet of flame marched toward Vogel's hiding spot. Out of a shadowy mass, the big man in the peaked *sombrero* suddenly emerged, one arm across his face, guarding it from the choking sweep of smoke.

One shot punctuated the ominous onrush of the fire.

Vogel's arm dropped from his face to his middle. In the eerie firelight, death was plainly stamped on his pain-twisted features. His sloping shoulders drooped. He swayed, then plunged forward, rooting full length into the sand. He lay motionless.

Payday leaped up, his gun holstered with that amazing speed that seemed without effort. He had hoped to wring an admission of guilt from Vogel. But these were not circumstances which permitted delay. He thrust himself into the open and started to run, with lowered head, in the direction of the adobe.

In this island of growth, the fire would soon exhaust itself. It could not spread onto the barren, rocky ground that surrounded it.

But as he began his getaway, a sudden gust caught the fire and whipped it across his path—a fiery sheet that roared like some waterfall of hell.

Payday's route of escape now was toward the *cienaga*. The fire would halt at the edge of the lush, marshy ground that surrounded the waterhole.

But he neither turned nor hesitated. He plunged straight ahead. There was still a chance to break through before the flames built a fiery, impenetrable wall. And it was a chance that he was determined to take, at any cost. For the fire was marching toward the spot where young Yates lay helpless, pierced by two bullets. Too weak, in all probability, to crawl unaided into the open and escape that inferno that devoured its way through the dense mesquite.

Swallowed in smoke swirls, Payday stumbled on, blinded and gasping. The heat beat down and his clothing smoldered. The wind came again, but instead of bringing respite it blasted the fire down, sending Payday to his knees. He came up again, reeled drunkenly, and plunged on.

He was in the heart of it and each breath was an agony. His eyes streamed. Instinct alone guided him. The scorching lash of fire singed his hair and blistered his hands that protected his face. His brain was filled with stabs of pain and he fought off a sick giddiness which threatened to lapse into unconsciousness.

He blundered into thorny branches that gouged deeply at his seared flesh. Burning embers settled onto his shoulders, the cloth smoking under their hellish embrace.

The sound had mounted to an inferno of fury. But out of it he distinguished a faint, desperate shout. He swerved toward it. The shout came nearer. He tried to answer, and choked.

"Parker!" he heard the cry again. "For God's sake, Parker—"

And then, all at once, he gulped clean air. It gave him barely enough strength to push on a ways farther, to swab at his eyes with hot sleeves and try to see.

The cry came again, at his feet, and he felt a hand clutch at his leg.

He crouched down, gathered Yates in his arms, and half-carrying, half-dragging him, struggled on. He could see no longer, for his eyes were swollen shut. It was Yates whose directions, gasped out, guided him those last few yards.

When Payday reached the open, he crumpled. He slowly rose. Not power enough left in him to lift the other man now. So he dragged him, inch by inch, until they were safe beyond the clutch of the fire god.

He dropped again and did not rise. They lay huddled together, the two of them, until the thicket which had been Death's stalking grounds was reduced to murmurous embers.

Then they made it to the adobe.

CHAPTER VI

The Melody Mystery

ANGER is like fire. But hate is an acid. It bites slowly, but deep. Mavity hated like that. It was a hate that penetrated to his vitals, and finally brought murderous decision.

With Sim Vogel out of the way, the Hang-town barkeeper would no longer have to fear exposure of his part in the conspiracy that

ended in the death of Jake Melody.

The afternoon that events were drawing to a climax at the Laguna adobe, Mavity left his establishment in the hands of a swamper-assistant. He cleaned and oiled a saddle gun, crammed loads into the magazine, and while the town was wrapped in its daily siesta, he rode forth, unobserved.

His intended destination was the V-Bar-O. Whatever happened after he got there could be charged off to the blow that Vogel delivered that day when Mavity had acted as good Samaritan, and been rewarded with the slap that floored him.

Mavity was not an expert horseman, and he was unused to the rigors of a long ride. He went slowly. The little sorrel that carried him took full advantage of the rider who spared steel, and plodded along at an ambling walk, mile after mile.

The gait suited Mavity's purpose. He was timing his arrival at the V-Bar-O around nightfall. A time when a saddle gun was a surer weapon than the six-gun Vogel wore.

HE was several miles short of his destination when he saw the flame-reddened sky, off to the north.

He reined up and studied the scene worriedly. He knew the country well enough to fix the location of the fire at the *cienaga*. What was happening there? Fire meant human presence, that was certain. And human presence, there in the vicinity of the guilty secret he shared with Vogel, that might lead to unpleasant discoveries.

After a few moments of hesitation, Mavity left the V-Bar-O trail and made off at brisker pace for Laguna.

Darkness found him still in saddle, and the sky-glow, close ahead, had diminished to an angry blur. A little before the rise of a late moon, Mavity's sorrel carried him to the ruins of the old adobe where Melody had camped—and died.

Mavity alighted stiffly. He saw something stir in the deep shadows beside a crumbled wall. He was a superstitious man and he was scrambling back onto his saddle when he heard a voice. Hoarse and weak it came, but Mavity recognized it as belonging to the lean, brown stranger who had made such a brief, sensational call some days before at the saloon.

"Who's there?" came the voice. "Come closer, whoever yuh are."

Mavity reluctantly spurred up alongside the wall. He groped for his saddle gun as he came, drawing the weapon from its boot. Payday rose almost in front of him. Peering through the dark, Mavity saw that the stranger's eyes were bandaged. He dragged with renewed eagerness at the saddle gun. It rasped free of the leather boot.

Payday's croaking voice came sharp, commanding:

"Let go yore gun, mister! I can't see, but I can hear plenty! And I sometimes shoot by ear!" A six-gun glinted in the *Tejano's* hand.

"No call for hostilities, Parker," Mavity replied shakily.

"Then climb down an' rest yore pants. Yuh're the barkeep, huh?"

Mavity scrambled to the ground.

"What's happened here?" he wanted to know. He saw Yates, stretched out beside the wall. Partly aroused by their voices, the wounded rancher stirred and groaned.

"Man bent up, sort of. Stopped couple bullets, Yates did," answered Payday. "Needs expert mendin'. Sudden, too."

"Bad hit, is he? By who?"

"Vogel."

"Where's Sim now?" Mavity was savagely eager.

"In hell. On a one-way ticket. Look here, barkeep. Our hosses, they're over by the water. Gear, too. Reckon it's up tuh you."

A faint radiance rimmed the east. Moon-up soon. Mavity was eager to get away from this spot. With Vogel dead, he breathed easier than he had for weeks. He climbed back onto the sorrel and headed for the *cienaga*, across the hot ashes marking the charred remnants of the mesquite thicket.

Payday, waiting until Mavity rode off, felt his way along the wall, then stooped and began to gather in the

corners of a blanket around a strangely heaped array. An array of bleached, broken bones, with grim souvenirs identifying them as the remains of Jake Melody. Bones and—a glittering, incredible heap of bright, gold nuggets! A fortune in raw gold!

Then Payday knelt beside his companion.

"We'll clamp yuh onto a saddle *muy pronto,* Yates," he said.

The wounded man, weak from loss of blood, struggled up onto an elbow.

"It was — Mavity?" he gasped weakly.

"The barkeep, sure. He came."

"Why? He say why?"

"Not him, no."

Yates reached out for Payday's shoulder. He was suddenly wrought up, apprehensive.

"Watch out, *amigo!*" he whispered hoarsely. "Bad medicine, that jigger! Him an' Vogel—too damn chummy, they was!"

Mavity was returning, leading the palomino and Yates' mount. The moon was rising. It had driven away the earlier opaque dark. The scene by the ruined wall was illumined in silvery radiance.

Mavity reined up. Payday now was tieing the corners of the blanket around the amazing cache he had taken from the sun-baked adobe. He was unaware of Mavity's scrutiny. His smoke-blinded, bandaged eyes could not detect the leap of greed in Mavity's eyes. Those restless eyebrows were at work again. Mavity, with sudden harsh decision, went for the carbine booted beside his leg.

The move came at the moment that Yates, aroused by a premonitory warning, pulled himself up against the wall.

"Parker!" he cried out. "Quick, man, behind yuh!"

A curse rippled from Mavity's lips. He swung the carbine muzzle on the stooped form of Payday, and the hammer clicked under his thumb.

It was the sound that had warned Payday, in that past dawn, on this same spot. The sound of a man who craved to kill. His holster was at his hip and his hand flashed to it with unfailing precision.

He drew and flipped the Colt over his shoulder in a lightning aim, guided only by that ominous click. The draw and the pull that ended in a flame-spurting roar was swift as a sidewinder's fang-thrust.

FROM Mavity came a gurgling cry. The carbine fell from his shoulder, clattered onto the wall and dropped to the ground. The leap of his horse unsteadied him. He clutched once for his saddlehorn, missed, and sprawled to the earth.

He struck on his shoulders. He scrambled desperately onto his knees and reached for his fallen saddle gun.

Yates, with an effort that tormented every sinew in his body, hauled himself over the wall and dropped in a heap on the weapon. He sent a smashing blow, every ounce of his remaining strength behind it, into Mavity's face.

Mavity grunted and his hands went for Yates' throat.

Payday staggered blindly around the end of the wall and hurled himself on the struggling pair. He caught Mavity's scrawny neck in the crook of his arm and jerked. Mavity's hold on Yates broke. His breath came in wheezing gusts. Then words, half audible:

"Let up! God, I'm done!"

Payday pinioned him to the ground. He felt a soggy, widening moistness on Mavity's shirtfront. He felt the man go limp. He was not lying. He was done.

"Talk up, fast!" rasped Payday. "Who killed Melody?"

Mavity poured out his guilty secret with his dying strength. He seemed frantically anxious to unburden his soul before he went.

"When ol' Jake began payin' me in dust an' nuggets, I knowed he'd made a strike. I—I loaded his drinks. Sim Vogel, he done the rest. They rode off tuhgether. S-Sim, he tried tuh dig the truth out o' Jake. Jake refused tuh talk." He halted, his breath coming weaker.

"And then?" Payday demanded.

"An' then Sim killed him. Here at

the Laguna house. Ol' Jake, he'd been patchin' up these adobe walls. Had a puddle o' mud an' some half-dried bricks." A shudder passed through Mavity's frame.

"Then Vogel butchered him an' hid the body in the wall, is that it?" Payday rapped out. "Say it quick, barkeep. Yuh won't last long."

Mavity's eyes were closing. He nodded his head.

"Yes, yes!" he gurgled. "But how in God's name did yuh find—"

"Providence done that. Strange ways she performs her wonders. Vogel's own bullet busted one o' them bricks. Sure odd Vogel wasn't smart enough tuh reelize Melody cached his gold in this *casa*. An old Border trick, hidin' treasure in adobe walls."

Broken phrases of a long-forgotten prayer came from Mavity. A prayer he never finished.

"An'—an' forgive us our sins—" he panted.

He died then.

Payday got to his feet. The moon was well up. A shadowy thing flitted along the rise beyond the burned mesquite. A desert lobo lifted his voice in his age-old hunt-song.

The palomino nuzzled his master's shoulder.

"Git this straight, pardner," Payday told the animal as he flung an arm across the restless neck. "*Senor* Coyote, he's a better breed than these Hang-town *hombres*. He warns before he kills."

THE horse jerked his head as though in perfect understanding. Then Payday lifted Yates and helped him to mount. He got the nugget-weighted blanket and tied it behind the rancher's saddle.

"Yore hoss, he'll find the trail tuh the Circle Y," he said. "Good luck, Yates. And—*adios*."

"There's a job on the Circle Y—" Yates started to say.

The palomino nudged Payday Parker again. A faint, cynical smile touched the wandering gun-slinger's haggard cheeks.

"Me, I never linger nowhere long," he said.

He swung to leather, then. He rode off through the moonlight. Toward the river and the land beyond. And the horizon of his next adventure.

How Well Do You Know Your West?

See whether you can answer these five questions. After writing your answers down, look up ours on Page 129 — but DON'T look first, *hombre*, or you'll spoil the fun.

1. Standing at the top of *what peak* in Flagstaff, Arizona, can one see into six states and one foreign country?

2. How far does the Overland Trail, straightest and shortest cross-country thoroughfare of the West, extend? Did the white man first use this trail?

3. How did the state of Nebraska get its name?

4. Where and when was the first Wild West rodeo held?

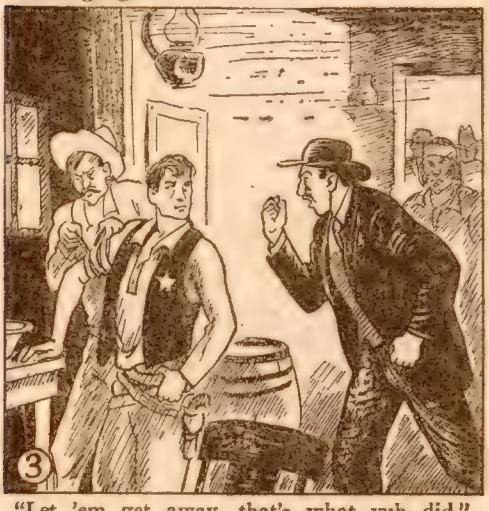
5. What are lilies of the desert?

Star-Toter's Grit

A SIX-GUN SANDY ADVENTURE IN PICTURES

Guns roar in the darkness of the night. Along the single street of the little cowtown comes the thunder of galloping hoofs. "Outlaws!" shouts an excited voice. "They broke into th' bank an' are gettin' away! Stop 'em!" Sheriff Sandy leaps to the door of a friend's shack as he hears the noise. Suddenly his gun barks and a bandit falls! "That's one of 'em," murmurs Sandy as he determines to clean up the entire gang!

"Halt!" calls Sandy as the outlaws gallop by, heading for the edge of the town. "Git th' sheriff!" shouts one of the men. The outlaw leader whirls in his saddle. His gun booms. Sandy is hit in the arm.



"Let 'em get away, that's what yuh did," Sam Arnold, the town banker, snaps at Sandy. "'Bout time we had a good sheriff 'round here! Stole ten thousand from th' bank, that's what they did." "Sorry, Arnold," says Sandy as his wounded arm is being dressed. "But we'll get 'em!"

Swiftly Sandy forms a posse and starts after the bandits. To his surprise they have left a plain trail. 'Somethin' funny about this," he says as he spies the outlaws ahead riding through the high grass of the prairie. "Reckon we'd better scatter an' circle 'round 'em."

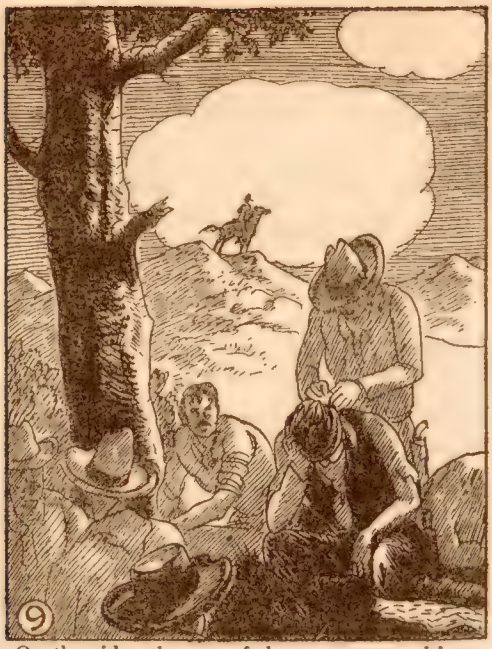
[*Turn page*]

Sandy circles around to the North, but the posse pay no heed to his warning. They ride straight toward the outlaws. "It's a trap," says Sandy as he sees that a fire has been lighted in the dry grass and is being blown toward the posse. In front of them the bandits' guns bark!

Sandy realizes that he has to go to the aid of the posse. The flames are raging behind them and as they advance they are directly in the outlaws' line of fire. "Get goin', hoss," shouts Sandy. He dashes through the smoke. *Bang! Bang!* He gets two of the outlaws, shooting left handed.

"Help!" comes a faint cry through the smoke. Sandy sees two men in the path of the prairie fire—their horses have been shot from under them. The flames are moving too fast for them to run for it. "Can't carry three men on one hoss," says Sandy as he ties a rope to his blanket. "Try this."

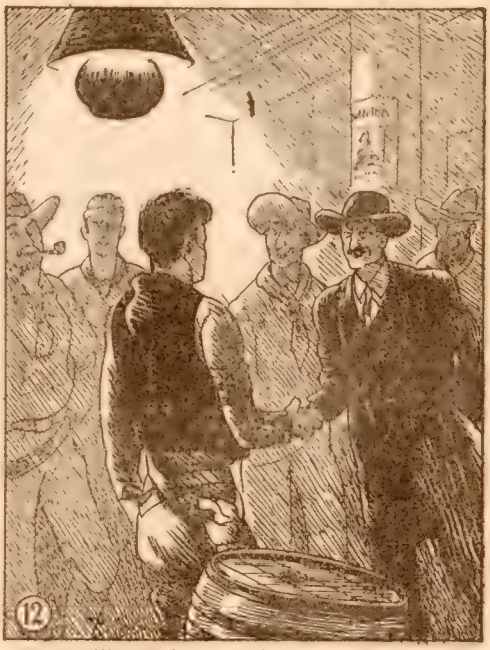
With the blanket spread out and dragging at the end of the rope behind him he reaches the two men from the posse. "Climb on th' blanket," he shouts. "An' pronto!" The two men leap on the blanket. Dragging its strange burden Sandy's horse dashes on to a rocky ridge above the fire.



On the ridge the rest of the posse are waiting, having managed to escape from the fire. "Nice work, Sheriff," says one of them. But Sandy rides away; he is not satisfied, for three of the outlaws are still loose. He spies the three bandits in the distance. He starts after them *pronto,* ready for battle!

Sandy succeeds in heading off the outlaws without revealing his presence. He boldly rides up on them, his guns roaring death. Before the surprised bandits realize what has happened two of them crash to the ground. "Yuh—" the leader wheels and raises his gun. Sandy's horse starts to fall.

Sandy makes a flying leap as his horse drops, and catches the bandit leader pulling him from the saddle. Grimly the two men fight, rolling about on the ground. "Yuh better quit!" pants Sandy. The outlaw tries to grab Sandy's gun—but the sheriff's other Colt knocks the badman out.



"Looks like I shore misjudged yuh, Sheriff," says Sam Arnold, the banker, when Sandy and the posse have returned, bringing with them the stolen money. "I apologize." "That's all right, Sam," Sandy grins as they shake hands. "Come on boys," says Arnold. "Let's drink tuh th' grit of our star-toter!"

Next Month: Six-Gun Sandy in OUTLAW PLUNDER

Hoodoo Ranch

The Mark on a Bullet Sets Doug Bailey on the Smoky Trail of Outlaws As He Strives to Win Back His Good Name!

By TOM GUNN

Author of "The Sheriff of Painted Post," "Outlaw Vengeance," etc.

CHAPTER I

Parole

DOUG BAILEY leaned his chap-clad body wearily against the bar in the Cowman's Rest saloon and ordered a tequila to cut the dust out of his throat and the weariness out of his body. Ray Norris, his partner, was beside him, dust-covered, too, from the long and grueling drive that the two had made.

Old Kemp was at the far end of the bar, drinking with a friend and still wearing the star he had sported all these five years. He had been a good sheriff despite his years. He look at Bailey and nodded with an expressionless face. Others in the room looked at him, averted their gaze quickly lest he start to speak to them.

Doug felt the tension in the room and tossed off his drink without looking around.

Then someone spoke to him.

"So yuh're back, are you, Bailey?" There was derision in the voice—scorn that cut Bailey to the quick.

He turned with a nervous suddenness, caught his swift-surging anger before his hand had quite touched the gun it sought, and looked at the speaker with tightened lips. He answered coldly, his body tense.

"Yes, Drew, I'm back. What about it?"

The man facing Bailey was in his early twenties—about Bailey's own age—and he wore his flashy range garb like a dude. He had a small, carefully trimmed black mustache that he was always unconsciously twisting. He leaned against the bar near Bailey, but there was no ease in his slouch.

"There's just this about it: yuh're making a mistake in coming back here. We've got trouble enough around here without having a convicted rustler to watch. Too many cattle disappearing from the range already—"

Doug Bailey's eyes blazed and he fell into a crouch, anger stiffening his muscles. The sneering face of the man before him danced before his eyes like a mirage—like a hateful image, grimacing, sending him back to hell before he had entirely become adjusted to his freedom. The image taunted him. Ex-convict! Paroled criminal! They wouldn't give him a chance.

Rage made his voice thick, palsied his gun hand.

"Yuh asked for it!" he said thickly. "Go fer that gun—if yuh're not afraid."

Drew's eyes were bright, unnaturally so. Sparkling and beady black like those of a snake stalking its

Bailey's guns sent a blazing hailstorm of lead at the rocks

prey—watching tense for the moment to strike. Waiting—

Bailey's hands were trembling with his rage. Drew's eyes saw them trembling. And Drew used that knowledge to drive Bailey to greater fury.

"Ex-convict," he spat disdainfully. "Rustler! Thief!"

Bailey's hand went for his gun—came out like lightning. Men scattered from the bar—overturned chairs—threw themselves on the floor.

Bailey's gun roared. Drew's gun roared.

And even as Bailey triggered his weapon he felt his arm knocked into the air—felt feet tripping him. He sprawled out, grasped at the bar with his left hand, landed on the floor on his back, his weapon smoking.

Drew stood where he was, his gun smoking and a sneer on his face. He had escaped death when the blow on Bailey's arm had thrown his bullet wild.

Bailey lay on the floor without a wound, death for himself only averted by his having been thrown down. He looked around, bewildered, to see who had interfered in his fight.

OLD KEMP, the sheriff, stood over him, clutching the weapon he had jerked out of the holster at the hip of Bailey's partner. Norris stood back unarmed, still surprised at the amazing way the officer had nipped the fight in the bud.

Old Kemp showed no effect of his exertion, but stood calmly in the middle of the trouble, in command of the situation by that very imperturbability which always encompassed him.

"Put them guns away," he said without emotion. "We ain't havin' no trouble here."

Something of the self-control of the officer cooled down the fires of Bailey's rage, made him conscious of having been deliberately led to this exhibition of uncontrollable temper. It rankled in his breast, stung like a strong acid, but he managed to get control of himself as he got to his feet and pouched his gun.

Drew leaned against the bar and poured himself a drink with a great show of unconcern. Then he turned to old Kemp.

"I don't want to prefer any charge against Bailey," he said with a great show of consideration. "I know it's hard enough fer a man to get a new start when he's—when he's in Bailey's position. I was jest trying to be friendly. Let's forget it."

Bailey's mouth hardened around corners as he watched the dude puncher leave the saloon. When the butterfly doors had swung together behind the man, he heard the sheriff talking to him.

"Drew's right, Bailey. A man out of prison on parole has to be doubly careful of what he does. Any kind of trouble at all will send him back to prison."

The thing that had eaten into Bailey's heart for three long years behind the bars would not be restrained.

"But, Sheriff, I never was guilty of rustlin' in the first place. Yuh know that as well as I do. Somebody framed me—whoever it was that killed my brother at the same time. I never stole anybody's cattle in my life!"

The calm never left the old peace officer.

"That may be so or not, Bailey. Yuh was sent up on the evidence against yuh. My advice is for yuh to watch yore step. Yuh've got a chance to make good, yuh an' Norris. Mind yore own business and work that little herd that yuh an' Norris brought back to yore place with yuh. Keep out of trouble and yuh'll make out all right. If yuh was done wrong, yuh'll soon ferget it—if yuh keep busy mindin' yore own business."

"I won't never fergit it—until I find the outfit that killed my brother and sent me up. Whenever I wipe that out, mebbe I'll fergit it. But not before."

The sheriff rubbed his chin, and as he turned away he said:

"That's yore affair, but yuh'd better remember that I have the responsibility of seein' that yuh don't violate yore parole. And with what

yuh got against yuh already, shootin' a man's a pretty hard thing to explain away to any parole board. Better use a piggin' string on that gun hand o' yores."

Tense, holding himself in check only by the greatest effort, Doug Bailey dug his hand into his pocket and clutched at an almost shapeless piece of lead that he had been saving for almost three years.

The prison doctor had dug it out of his hip where it had been lodged ever since that mad night when a concealed gunman had fired upon him and his brother from the concealment of a boulder on their back range. That shapeless piece of lead was the only connecting link between Doug Bailey and his brother's killer.

BAILEY strode out into the night and mounted his horse, his face hard-set and his muscles quivering. His eyes were heavy-lidded under the stress of the injustice he had been compelled to face, and a burning anger fevered his face.

Ray Norris, lean and taciturn, followed him, silently brooding. They cantered down the winding lane that led out toward their run-down spread, two shadows against the grey ribbon of the trail, in whose minds there were shadows blacker than were ever made by obstructions in the moonlight—shadows that turned hearts to flint—that blackened the soul. They were past the state where words would bring relief; the miles of sandy trail echoed only to the monotonous *cloppity-clop* of shod hoofs.

They passed a ranchhouse where a dim light burned in a window and where the outbuildings looked like pale ghosts in the moonlight. Bailey's muscles tensed, but he kept his eyes straight ahead and kept his animal to his gait.

The Box Bar ranchhouse faded behind the pair of riders, the ranch where young Drew was foreman for big Brick Burns, whose spread covered a full two sections of the best grazing land in the valley. Burns and Bailey's father had been friendly, but that would all be changed now. After this incident with Drew, Bailey would never visit that ranch again.

The pair of horses kept up a steady lope that carried the partners down deeper into the valley, into the inky blackness underneath the oak and willow and sweetgum trees that lined the river bank. At the shallow ford they stopped their animals knee deep in the shallow running water and let them drink, while the men sat still enwrapped in their silence.

But a battle was going on in each of the men—the inevitable battle that men have to fight with themselves at the first conflict they encounter when they face the world for the first time with the prison stigma upon them. Doug Bailey looked at the dim trail across the river, faintly visible in the moonlight.

On the bank, at the very water's edge, the trail divided. One fork of it led to his ranch—where he had lived and worked until this trouble had sent him to the State's prison. The other fork—the one to the left—led into the depths of the mountains. There were outlaws holed up in those hills—cattle thieves, murderers.

He looked at those two trails speculatively. Where they left the river they both seemed smooth, easy traveling—inviting.

And then the shot rang out—from the fork of the trail.

Doug Bailey threw himself from his horse and hit the water with a splash. His hat with a bullet hole in it sailed off his head and floated down the river. Another splash beside him threw water in his face as

Ray Norris landed beside him, both hands loaded with guns.

CHAPTER II

The Trail to the Left

THE yellow flash of flame came from a gun back of a pile of boulders in the very fork of the trails. Another followed it. Lead struck the surface of the water with an angry whine and ricocheted away into the night.

Bailey and Norris stood in the running water up to their boot tops, weapons gripped tight, fingers taut on hair triggers.

A dagger of flame shot from behind the rocks—more lead whined at the men.

The night suddenly roared. Bailey's guns sent a blazing hailstorm of lead at the stones, nicking chips off the rock like the fragments of a hand grenade. Norris' gun joined in the chorus.

Yellow moonlight looked down on the river bottom, peeped through the branches of the trees and sent pale fingers of light to point out the fighters—the two men knee-deep in the shallow water of the river—the concealed gunmen ambushing them from the pile of stone in the fork of the trail.

Doug Bailey sent the last two bullets from his guns—followed their flight with a curse.

A cry of mortal pain answered him—answered from behind the rocks.

Then there was silence. The battle ceased with the abrupt suddenness with which it had started.

Doug Bailey broke his Colts one at a time and ejected the shells, stuffing the cylinders again from his belt. He spun them once each, then pouched the weapons.

And now that open battle had come—now that his taut nerves had found something to feed upon besides themselves, he was calm.

The two men waited, there in the stream, for a full five minutes. No other sound came from behind the rocks.

"Musta got him!" It was the clipped voice of the taciturn Ray Norris. "Yuh go to the left—I'll take the right. We'll see!"

They gripped guns and waded out of the stream to the far bank. There they separated, clutched guns that trained on the pile of boulders that was stacked up higher than a man's head. Dark shadows lurked about it.

No shot came from the person behind the rocks.

Bolder now, but still with guns trained on the shadows behind the stones, Bailey approached the hiding-place.

His eyes strained into the darkness—came to rest upon a shapeless form lying on the ground, where it had tumbled from the rocks above. Gun steady upon the mass, Bailey advanced.

The mass in the edge of the shadows was a man—a dead man.

Bailey's breath came hard when he saw who it was. He cursed under his breath as Norris joined him.

"Jack Drew!"

Norris whistled softly between his teeth. He didn't say anything.

"Tryin' to dry-gulch us," Bailey continued. "I wonder what he's been layin' for me for? I never did him any dirt."

"Mebbe tryin' to get yuh out o' the way to protect Brick's stock. May of thought yuh an' me was gonna do some rustlin' to build up our herd."

"That ain't excuse enough fer murder. There's somethin' deeper'n that."

"Mebbe it was him killed yore brother."

"Couldn't 'a' been. He was in town

that night and rode out with the sheriff when the law come. That lets him out—even if he didn't like us."

Bailey picked up a Winchester rifle lying near the body of Drew. He levered it and a single shell flew out. It had been fired. Drew had unquestionably emptied his gun at the pair in the water.

Then—

The muscles in Bailey's body went hard at the thought that struck him.

"We couldn't have killed Drew," he barked emotionally. "I didn't even see his head when I fired—and I fired lower than the top of the rock pile where he would have been hidden."

Hurriedly, Bailey dragged the body of Drew out of its shadows so that the moon shone on it. He dropped to his knees and examined what had been the overbearing foreman of the Box Bar ranch.

"Look!" he exclaimed to Norris. "Look at that bullet hole—it's in his back!"

He turned the man over and was pointing to the spot where Drew's shirt was blood-soaked around a bullet hole—squarely in the man's back.

"Powder burns around the wound," Norris said in a hard voice. He had struck a match and was examining the death wound carefully.

Then he jerked out his jackknife and cut out a patch of the man's shirt around the bullet hole.

"I got an idea we'll need this pretty *pronto*," he gritted.

Bailey halted in his own examination of the dead man—straightened up—and listened.

"Listen!" he snapped.

The night air carried to their ears the pounding rhythm of the pounding feet of horses—several of them. Bailey got to his feet hurriedly.

"We got to get out of this quick!" he said in a clipped undertone.

Convinced now that he had not been responsible for the death of Drew, Bailey's mind raced over the new problem that confronted him:

Drew dead—on the road to Bailey's ranch. The quarrel in the saloon, witnessed by the sheriff himself. The caution about his parole. Prison again—and again unjustly.

Instinctively, almost, Doug Bailey's eyes darted up the trail to the left—to the mountains where outlaws hid out from the officers.

"Come on!" he barked at Norris. "We're ridin' to the hills!"

The horses had waded out of the stream when they finished drinking and were grazing a hundred yards away. Bailey and Norris raced for them.

CLOSE now, within view, and within pistol shot, came half a dozen riders, pounding their mounts to top speed. The leader of the group swerved his animal to the left—headed directly toward the grazing mounts of Bailey and Norris. They were gaining.

"We can't beat 'em," Norris said. "Will we give it to 'em? Yuh know what it means to get caught. Back to prison."

Bailey saw the hopelessness of getting to their horses before they were headed off. Even if they reached their mounts before the men got to them there was still the certainty that the half dozen men could kill them before they could get going. The riders were within close pistol shot. Bailey stopped in his tracks.

"Nope. We'll face 'em."

"And swing?"

"No. But as long as we're alive we got a chance to get loose. I want to live long enough to do the job I set out to do. After that—it don't matter."

The riders fanned out a dozen feet apart and encircled the two men who stood afoot on the prairie. In the dull moonlight Bailey recognized

only one of them, the massive rancher Brick Burns, leader of the posse. The others were no doubt his own men.

Burns had a rifle in his hand, ready for instant use. His riders carried guns covering the two men.

Burns voiced an order to Bailey.

"Get them hands up—whoever yuh are—unless yuh want a bellyful o' lead."

Bailey looked around at the group that surrounded him. There was not a chance in the world to get away without inviting sure death. His hands went up, and those of Norris.

"Pat 'em down, Joe," Brick Burns ordered one of his men. The rider slipped off his horse and collected the four weapons from the pouches of the prisoners.

THEN Burns himself slid off his horse and stood before them. He squinted through the half light, then grunted.

"Bailey!" The tone was one of surprise. "Was that yuh shootin'?"

"Yes," Bailey said, relieved to see his neighbor at the head of the riders.

Yet the relief was not unmixed with doubt.

"Yes. Yore foreman tried to dry-gulch us for some reason. He picked a quarrel with me earlier in the evening. He started shootin' at us when we was waterin' our horses. We shot back. He was killed while we was shootin' at each other. But—"

Bailey hesitated in the middle of his story. He changed his mind and decided not to tell Burns yet that he had not been the one who killed Drew. Somebody had planned to make it look like he had done it—possibly had expected Bailey to believe that he had killed the foreman.

"But what?" Burns demanded.

"But he didn't hit us. He's lyin' dead over there by them rocks at the fork of the trail."

Burns seemed in the grip of an emotion as he digested the fact that his foreman had been killed.

"Mighty bad business, Bailey," he said at last. "And it won't go so good for yuh, I'm afraid—this killin' a man while yuh're out on parole."

Bailey looked at his soggy feet.

"How come Drew was dry-gulchin', me?" he demanded. "I hadn't done him any harm." He studied Burns shrewdly when he learned that the rancher was of the belief that his foreman had been shot by Bailey.

"If he was doin' that, it was a mistake—and a bad one," Burns said. "Our cattle have been disappearing at a pretty fast clip lately, and we've been ridin' nights for quite a while. We was scattered out—scoutin' for any suspicious rustler signs. Drew was to take the road while the rest of us scattered around other hidin' places. When I heard the shots I signaled the other boys — thinkin', o' course, Drew was fightin' rustlers. This is shore a bad mess, Bailey, and it's gonna be hard to explain. I'll do what I can with the sheriff, though, to make him understand."

Again this expressed sympathy while evidence was piling up against him, while forces working behind his back were laboring to drive him back to the prison walls from which he had so recently come. It clawed at his breast like some great carnivorous animal—this plot—whatever it was—to get him out of the way.

"I don't want any explanations of this and that," Bailey exclaimed angrily. "I haven't done anything I shouldn't. What I want is to know what this business is all about—and I'm going to find out."

"I'm shore the sheriff'll understand," Burns said placatingly. "I know just how yuh feel. But I think we'd better go in and get it straightened out in town."

"I'm not goin' in there again—until I find out what's back of all this

stuff," Bailey said with finality. "Give me back my guns."

"'Fraid we can't do that," Burns said firmly. "If I let yuh go—"

Burns was standing directly in front of Bailey, and his horse was just back of him.

Desperate fury flooded Bailey's whole body and tightened his nerves until they were hard as rawhide.

Suddenly his fist shot forward—straight as a piston, it landed squarely on the point of Burns' jaw. Burns tumbled over backward like a fence post and hit the ground with a thud.

Bailey didn't look to see if he would rise again. He dived at the man holding his guns, grabbed one of them before the man knew what had happened. One more long step, swift as a jackrabbit, took him to Burns' horse. He hit the saddle on the run and dug spurs in.

The animal snorted in surprised rage, jumped straight up in the air and landed with his head pointed straight ahead of him and feet pounding the ground like trip-hammers, throwing up dirt at every blow.

Bailey lay flat over the animal's head—then slid out of the saddle and clung to the side of the horse opposite the men, one leg hooked over the saddle-horn like a rodeo rider. The horse's body protected him from bullets.

A fusillade of shots pursued him. Bullets whined around his ears. A hot burning sensation blistered his leg as a slug scorched the skin. The reaction almost loosened his hold on the animal—but he recovered himself.

He slid back into the saddle when he was out of pistol range. Looking back he saw the figures of the men riding hot on his trail. They were too far away for their bullets to be dangerous now.

He counted them: there were five of them on horseback—racing after him.

Satisfied, he leaned over the saddle and gave Burns' horse his head as the animal set out in a strong steady lope. The five men trailing him meant the thing he had hoped would happen. In their excitement at his escape—in their eagerness to capture him, they had forgotten Norris for the moment.

Norris, afoot, was safe. Bailey knew where to make contact with him.

Bailey slowly turned his animal's course.

He headed him for the hills—took the trail to the left.

The trail that led to the hangout of outlaws. The mountains ahead of him offered him refuge.

CHAPTER III

Hideout!

HE worked his way high up into the mountains. He left the regular trail and made his way through boulders and scrub pine which in the darkness offered no suggestion of a trail. But he knew these mountains like a book. He had been raised in them.

He came at last to what he had called Brown Bear Cave when he had discovered it as a kid. Only recently he had shown it to Norris, and he knew that Norris would look for him here, as the most likely place to find him. In his youth he had played outlaw and had hidden in this cave to evade the posses that he imagined were chasing him.

Now his face grew hard with the irony of it. He was actually hiding in this cave—actually running from the law. It was a bitter pill.

He unsaddled Burns' horse and tied him out to graze, then lay down to sleep in the cave, the saddle for a pillow.

It was some time after midnight

when he awoke suddenly. There was movement outside of the cave. He gripped the butt of his gun and crept out. Norris was standing where the moonlight would shine on him through the trees—so Bailey could recognize him. Behind him was his horse and Bailey's.

Bailey stepped out. Norris saw him and joined him quickly.

"I been seein' things," Norris said. It was seldom that he talked, and it took something of considerable importance to make him the least bit excited. But he was excited now.

"What was it?"

"When them rannies set out after yuh, I got away and caught our horses and hightailed it down the river. Then I circled back and headed toward our place. Figgered I'd just hang around a while and see what takes place."

"What happened?"

"This Brick Burns, that yuh been figgerin' was all right, finally come ridin' up and he and his men surrounded the house and searched it for us. I was hidin' out in that clump of aspens an' they didn't see me. Then, when they comes out, he says to his men that he reckons our killin' will settle our hash so we won't show our heads around here no more."

"He's about right, at that," Bailey said bitterly.

"Then he says they'd better get to work in a hurry. He takes his men down to the corral where our giant herd of them two hundred head o' baldfaces is. They drive the stock out and head it this way—every single critter of 'em."

"There's nowhere they could get with them this way."

"That's what yuh think," Norris answered. "What they done was to drive them square into solid rock. I seen 'em disappear. Jest like passin' through a stone wall."

"Talk sense!"

"That don't make sense, but it's shore what happened. Want to go see?"

"Where is it?"

"This will surprise yuh. It's right on yore own back range."

Bailey swore under his breath.

"I thought I knew every foot of these hills, but that's new on me. Let's ride. I'm gonna blast that red-headed coyote out o' there if I get killed doin' it. That explains one thing, anyway. Now I know why folks wanted me and Joe off our ranch but didn't want to buy it. If they're usin' my place to rustle cattle they naturally wouldn't want to be the owners of the place. That's the best news I've heard in a long time. Let's go."

"Bueno!" Norris answered. "But jest a minute. I want to wrap up my leg. Got a little nick."

NORRIS slipped off his chaps and rolled up the leg of his overalls. His leg was bloody.

"Yuh been shot!" Bailey said.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell yuh. Them *hombres* spotted me trailin' 'em and tried to fan me down. A bullet bounced off a stone and made that nick. It ain't nothin'."

Bailey got busy quickly. He built a tiny fire to see by, and started dressing Norris' leg. The bullet had been almost spent when it hit him. Bailey found a heavy, black spot where it had lodged just under the skin. He sharpened his jackknife on the leg of his boot.

Norris grabbed on to the trunk of a tree. Bailey slit the skin of the leg and got the shapeless piece of lead out without trouble, then bandaged the leg.

Then he examined the bloody object he had extracted. He wiped the blood off and examined the thing closer.

And as he did so his entire body trembled with excitement. He held

it close to the fire and looked at it more carefully—hopefully, and in his face there was a strange expression that Norris had never seen before.

"What's the matter?" Norris asked.

Bailey appeared not to hear him until Norris had asked the question the second time. Then Bailey handed him the bullet.

"What would yuh say about that piece of lead?" he asked.

Norris squinted at it in the flickering light of the little greasewood fire.

"I couldn't say much, 'cept it looks like it was knocked out into a mushroom when it hit the rock before it hit me."

"Know what that was fired from?"

"Six-gun, I reckon. Don't look like a rifle bullet."

"It's not either one of 'em," Bailey said in a husky voice. "That bullet was fired by an automatic—an' it was an automatic that killed my brother at the time I was shot."

"How yuh know?"

The taciturn Norris' excitement was increasing.

Doug Bailey pulled the bullet out of his pocket—the one that he had been carrying ever since the doctor had taken it out of his body when he first entered prison. He handed it to Norris.

"Yuh see that little thing, like a dimple, on each of those bullets? Well, that's a sign they came out of an automatic. When they hit, they mushroomed out of shape so yuh couldn't otherwise tell. But the force of the powder behind an automatic bullet puts that dimple there, an' it don't matter if yuh shot it against a steel wall, that dimple would show still. Both these bullets come from automatics. Let's go. We're goin' to do some real gunnin'. I'm on the outlaw trail now, and the outlaw trail I'm going to ride. Show me that wall them cattle was driven through."

They caught their horses and rode down the mountainside, picking their way through the darkness more by instinct than by ability to see their way. Giving their horses their heads, they finally got on the main trail that led downward.

They rode silently. This was the hour that Bailey had been waiting for, he was sure. Burns had turned out bad. That might account for many things.

The respectable rancher was a rustler by night, had handled his stock in some hidden place on Bailey's own ranch. The idea of the man's duplicity stung Bailey to the quick. His older brother had trusted Burns, had told him of his troubles with rustlers, thus playing into Burns' hands. And Burns had killed him—and framed Doug into prison.

AT the foot of the mountain Norris led him off to the right and they rode for an hour before he called a halt.

"They come in this way," he said, pointing into a place where the mountainside was deep in the darkness of shadows. Bailey recognized the place.

"I've seen this place a thousand times," he said, "but it never occurred to me that there was any kind of hidden passage in it."

He dismounted and Norris followed him. He walked through the protective darkness under the trees that bordered the abrupt side of the mountain, looking, searching for a place where a herd of cattle might have been swallowed up. They worked a quarter of a mile each way.

But nothing but silence met them —silence and masses of granite mountainsides.

"I'll be blowed," Norris exclaimed under his breath when he had come to the conclusion that they were far

away from where the mountains had swallowed up the herd. "I said they walked through solid stone, but be danged if I ain't beginnin' to believe what I told yuh. Wonder what could have happened to 'em?"

"If cattle came here and disappeared into the mountain—then they're still there," Bailey said grimly. "And the men with 'em. And if they're here we're gonna find 'em. But it's not the cattle I want right now as much as it is Brick Burns."

"THEN yuh can see him—*pronto!* Up with 'em!" The strange voice barked the command from the concealment of a clump of gnarled sage. "Up, I said! I got a rifle on yuh, an' a itchin' trigger finger."

Bailey whirled, and from the clump he saw the barrel of a carbine shining in the moonlight. He raised his hands slowly into the air. Norris followed suit.

Then a man stepped out of the clump, the gun held in both hands waist high and trained on the pair. He approached and Bailey gritted his teeth in impotent rage as the man relieved them of their guns for the second time that night. It was one of Brick Burns' riders.

"So yuh was wantin' to see the ol' man," he taunted them. "Well, I'll be glad to usher yuh to him. He wants to see yuh just as bad, I reckon, judgin' by the squawk he put up when yuh gave him that punch in the jaw. Turn around and keep goin' till I tell yuh to stop. And don't get no funny notions—yuh ain't walkin' out on us again."

The man followed them along the foot of the mountain for a quarter of a mile, until they came back to the place where their horses were tied—the very place where Norris had said the cattle had disappeared.

Where was he taking them? Bailey wondered.

But he was not left long in suspense. The mystery was solved for him in short order.

The man walked them to the spot where the very rocks of the mountain jutted out of the ground as though erupting from the flat prairie like a mushroom. He reached his hand into some of the wild growth and caught the loose end of a piece of rusty haywire lying inconspicuously there.

Bailey saw the man jerk the wire three times. The other end of it disappeared somewhere into the solid stone. The man squatted with the wire in his hand, gripping his rifle with the other, barrel covering his two captives.

And then Bailey sucked air in between his teeth in surprise.

A large section of the mountain swung outward!

The face of a boulder more than twenty feet wide and over a dozen feet high opened out like some great barn door.

"I'm a sneakin' coyote!" Norris exclaimed, jarred out of his taciturnity by the uncanny sight before him. Bailey cursed under his breath.

"A painted tarpaulin with pictures of rock edges on it—like a stage set. Hidin' a natural passage. Why didn't we think o' that, Doug? Yuh knew these mountains—"

Their captor laughed coldly.

"The reason he didn't think of it was because, before he went to the *juzgado,* there was rocks here—a thin layer of 'em—hidin' the passage. We dug 'em out an' done all the art work in our spare time."

The man bowed ironically—both hands on his carbine.

"Will yuh step into our humble parlor?"

The passage was walled with the natural stone of the mountain, a narrow aisle leading inward on a level with the prairie for a distance of a hundred feet. Then it inclined

upward, and the crags around it were more tumultuous, like some giant tornado had scrambled them up and dumped them there in ragged piles when it was tired of them.

They followed the dark passage upward for nearly a quarter of a mile. As long as Bailey had lived in the neighborhood and had roamed the mountains on hunting expeditions he had never discovered this peculiar formation.

He looked upward and discovered the reason.

Ahead of him and to all sides the crags were so high and precipitous that nobody could have got into any position that would have looked down upon it. And the entrance to it had been concealed by the natural rock formation which Burns had blasted out.

"Here yuh are."

They stopped short, and Bailey got another surprise that jolted him. He was looking at a natural amphitheater with a level floor, resembling the dried and hardened mouth of an extinct volcano.

Fires burned in this natural corral and Bailey saw dark shadows working among cattle—his cattle. Branding irons went into the fires and came out cherry red—did their duty in re-marking Bailey's cattle.

Burns met the outer guard who had rounded up the prisoners.

"Good work, Joe," he said.

He dropped all pretense of friendliness toward Bailey, now that his activities had been discovered. He looked at the two prisoners with hard irony in his twisted smile.

"So yuh wasn't satisfied to get along dodgin' a murder trial!" he said. "Yuh wanted to come back and get somethin' worse. Wanted the same thing yore brother got, huh, Bailey?"

"No. I came to give the same thing my brother got—and mebbe some of the same thing I got."

"That ain't a bad ambition fer a young man," Burns said. "But I'm afraid yuh bucked up against somethin' a little too big fer yore boots this time."

"I'm beginnin' to see how-come yuh wanted me to stay off my place," Bailey answered. "And also who it was that made arrangements fer me to vacate it."

"Yore eyes are gettin' better," Burns answered. "But it's jest too bad it won't do yuh no good."

"No?"

"O' course not. Yuh don't think yuh're goin' out and report my little set-up to our good friend Sheriff Kemp, do yuh? And after that blow in the jaw yuh gave me?"

BAILEY played a hunch. He turned and faced the guard who had captured them.

"Does Burns always kill off you men like he did Drew whenever he wants to plant a murder on somebody?" he asked.

The guard looked uncomfortable in the moonlight. Burns' red hair bristled and he swore a blistering blue streak.

"I didn't kill Drew, yuh lyin' rattlesnake!" he stormed. Yuh did that yoreself. We heard the shots, and my man can swear to that the same as I can."

"Yuh shore take that accusation pretty hard—for an innocent cattle thief, don't yuh?" Bailey said scornfully. "'Fraid it will make the rest of yore boys nervous when they learn about it?"

"That'll be enough out o' yuh," Burns stormed. "Yuh're gonna do one thing for me, and then—"

"And then yuh'll put a bullet in me like yuh did my brother? Well, Burns, I ain't dead yet. I may live to put a bullet in you instead."

"Don't let a little thing like that worry you," Burns answered. "Yuh soon will be."

CHAPTER IV

Battle Royal

BRICK BURNS conducted his pair of prisoners up to one of the fires where the men were working with the branding irons. Bailey saw four of the punchers at work, two of them keeping the herd close-herded while the other two did the actual work of branding.

Working on the ground, the men made loops, caught the cattle and bulldogged them to the ground. It took two of them to get one of the husky animals down and get pigging strings on three of the animal's feet so the animal could not fight back as they slowly re-worked the brand, one man using the rod and another sitting on the animal's head.

Not over twenty of the cattle had been worked, despite the top speed to which Burns drove the men.

"Nice little natural brandin' corral, ain't it?" Burns said to Bailey. "How'd yuh like to have one of those irons stuck on yuh?"

"Want me in yore herd?" Bailey shot back at him.

"Nope. I don't handle scrubs. But I thought I might have to use an iron on yuh if yuh got obstinate. I've got a little job I want yuh to do that yuh might object to."

"Bein' what?"

"It ain't a very long story," Burns said. "This is what it amounts to. Yore brother Joe—before he—er—died—was runnin' the business end o' yore affairs that yore dad left; yuh understand? Yuh bein' busy lookin' after the stock end, probably, didn't know that the truth of the matter was that yore dad was half owner o' my ranch as well as ownin' his own.

"Don't be surprised at me tellin' yuh this dark secret o' mine, because, as I said, the knowledge ain't gonna do yuh any good. So anyway, yore dad had the notes and mortgages which I gave him when I bought his share. It amounts to quite a lot now, thanks to my hard work—"

"With a runnin' iron," Bailey finished for him.

"As I was sayin'," Burns continued, "old Kemp happened to be the witness to that transaction, and I've had an idea a long time that he was wonderin' about me and my affairs. So what I want yuh to do is to mark all them papers paid, and clear my title to the place. Which yuh can do legally, of course, bein' the sole heir."

"I wouldn't do it if I ever had seen such papers," Bailey answered. "I don't know what yuh're gettin' at, but there's somethin' else yuh got on yore mind. If my brother had been in possession of those papers yuh mention he would have told me about it."

"Shore he would," Burns answered. "But he never saw them either. I got hold of them about the time yore father died."

Bailey's hands were clutching futilely. If the man hadn't been carrying his gun in his hand, ready for instant action, Bailey would have taken the long chance of trying to throttle him barehanded. But there was too much at stake now to deliberately commit suicide.

There must be some way out of this trap.

And now that the whole story of the trouble was clear to him, now that the pieces of the sinister jigsaw puzzle were being put together, piece by piece, he was doubly determined to see it through to the end.

Which a dead man couldn't very well do.

Burns turned to the puncher that was squatting by the chip fire heating a branding iron.

"Get some piggin' strings and tie these *hombres* up!" he ordered. "I'm not takin' any more chances on their gettin' away."

It flashed upon Bailey that now before they tied him up was positively the last chance he would have to escape. Once those rawhide thongs bound him and Norris they were as good as dead. They were as good as dead already.

Now, if ever, he had to do something. Better a bullet through his middle here and now than a long siege of torture with a hot running iron and a slow and agonizing death later. He owed it to his partner to eliminate that suffering.

Burns was within two steps of him, gun in hand. The nearest puncher was still in the process of rising to his feet to get the rawhide straps Burns had demanded. Norris was closer to that man.

"Git him, Ray!" Bailey shouted, and dived at the same time—dived squarely at Burns' thighs like a football tackler. His wiry arms encircled the legs of the rancher. The latter's gun exploded and he shouted a curse. He tumbled over backward, clawing at the air, threshing at Bailey's head with the barrel of his Colt.

Norris dived at the same time, with a speed that indicated he had already reached the same conclusion that Bailey had. The puncher had just turned his back and Norris landed on him like a hoolihanned steer.

The pale glow of the branding fire lit a scene of milling arms and legs. Blows thudded against flesh. Four men grunted as knotted fists sank into flesh.

Brick Burns lay entangled in Bailey's arms, his legs kicking and boot heels spurring the man on top of him. One arm encircled Bailey. He kept his gun-hand free—twisted his wrist in a superhuman effort to get the weapon's barrel aimed at Bailey.

Bailey released the man's body and caught the wrist of the gunman in his two hands. Burns' arm was hard as a rock as he strained with every ounce of his strength to get the weapon trained on his attacker. The barrel of the gun slowly arced toward Bailey's chest.

Bailey gripped the wrist and beat the gun hand against a small stone on the ground—pounded it against the stone until the bones crunched and the muscles gave way in sheer agony. He ripped the revolver from Burns' stunned hand and kicked it toward the branding fire. From the corner of his eye he saw the twisting and squirming figures of Norris and the other man.

Then suddenly there were shouts from the men across the natural corral. The men working the herd had seen the commotion. They came running.

Bailey crashed a stony fist into Burns' face—pounded again and again with trip-hammer blows. And finally one blow square on the point of the jaw. Burns cringed once and relaxed.

BAILEY was on his feet instantly. Grabbed up the gun that lay at the very edge of the fire. Norris and his assailant were still at grips, deadlocked in their fight for life.

Bailey faced the oncoming men on the tip of his toes and with Burns' weapon gripped in knotted fist. The red flames glowed on a face set hard as granite. Doug Bailey was out to kill—out to avenge the wrongs that had piled upon his shoulders until they had seared his very soul.

Burns' men came shooting. If this prisoner lived they were due to die. They separated as they came, made it more difficult for Bailey to guard himself against their cross-fire. And they had the advantage of being in

the darkness while Bailey was outlined in the better light of the branding fire.

But if a blazing sun had poured down upon him and if his enemies had been protected by the blackness of hell, Doug Bailey would have done the same thing. His temples throbbed and his very being shook with the instinct to kill—with the thirst for blood to wipe out the wrongs he had suffered.

WITH the gun in his hand he went out to meet the guns of the remaining two of the Burns band. He crouched low like a panther and his tread was as soft as that of the cat.

The two men in the shadows triggered their weapons, first from the right and then from the left came the whine of bullets, came the orange jabs of wicked flame and came the roar of the guns.

And slowly and carefully, deliberately and coldly came the answering shot from the hand of the man they surrounded. Oblivious of the bullets that whipped out against him, giving no thought to protection, he went forward, step by step.

A bullet seared his arm, ripped the flesh from wrist to shoulder. It burned like the white-hot branding iron he had barely escaped. And the agony of the wound served only to harden his heart against the killers.

He could see only the dim outlines of the men in the shadows—but he placed his bullets carefully—with slow deliberation.

Suddenly his muscles jerked—an impact like a ton of falling stone crashed against his head—spun him around—slammed him against the ground with a breath-taking jolt. Red flame filled his head—flared before his eyes—blinded him.

His senses reeled. Red lights flared in grotesque designs before his face. Time stood still. An eternity passed—time stood still, yet raced. He was lying on the ground, immovable, incapable of thought.

He clutched at the fast ebbing consciousness. He must think—he had been shot, knocked down. Time was flying—time was at a standstill. Why weren't there more shots? Why didn't the men finish the job?

If he could only get his mind to function. He lay helpless on the ground—waiting for the finishing shot. Why didn't it come?

He struggled with his mind, tried to make it work. It wouldn't; it refused to function, refused to take control and order his body to act.

But it was clearing slightly. His ears could hear again after the sound of the explosion in his head. There were footsteps pounding in his ears. The men were coming, coming to finish their job. Why wouldn't his mind command his arm to work?

His gun was still in his hand. Through the dim recesses of his consciousness he could feel the hard handle of the weapon against the palm of his hand. Now he could feel his fingers wrapped around the handle, feel a finger on the trigger.

He opened his eyes. Through a red haze he could see dim outlines approaching, dark shadows of men moving toward him warily—men who were not quite sure he was dead.

Good!

Let them think he was dead. Bailey lay perfectly still, trying to force his mind to concentrate on his trigger finger—on his right wrist. A bloody fog blinded him—the figures coming toward him looked red, gruesome red, like a pair of devils out of hell.

Now they were close. Their guard would be relaxed a little. Words—confused words reached his brain.

"Got him all right."

Good!

Bailey concentrated every last ounce of his strength. Could he do

it? There was nothing else to do except try.

He tugged suddenly at the weight of his weapon, jerked the barrel up without moving his outstretched arm—jerked it with all the speed his half-dead body allowed.

The gun barked once—twice in as rapid succession as he could swing the arc of the barrel. It was a long chance—almost impossible shots both of them, from his position.

A miracle almost. Both men fell, toppled over almost on top of him. They died with surprised agony stamped on their faces.

But that hole in the mountain was infested with a never-ending stream of death. Who was this other man staggering toward him—with a gun in his hand?

Bailey turned his own weapon. It was heavy and he could barely lift its weight. He lay prone on the ground and it took both his hands to lift and aim the heavy gun.

Then he threw his last ebbing strength—every drop of it—into his trigger finger—and squeezed.

The gun roared and kicked him over on his back, so weak was his resistance. He didn't see the man fall.

And he didn't remember anything else until Norris revived him with water out of a canteen.

It was daylight, and Norris sat on a saddle thrown on the ground, wrapping his own wounds with what was left of the shirt he had torn to strips to bandage Bailey.

"Yuh were right," he said to Doug Bailey. "Burns carried an automatic concealed inside his clothes somewhere. The old revolver carried on the outside was used to throw off suspicion."

"I HAD a hunch that was the case," Bailey answered weakly.

"And here's something else that ought to help yuh get well in a hurry. When I whipped that guy I was wrestling with, I used an old Indian trick to loosen up his tongue. He admitted before he died that it was Burns that killed Drew, so it would look like yuh done it. But the main reason he done it was because Drew was gettin' too smart and was tryin' to blackmail Burns into lettin' him cut in for half of what they was stealin'. He had to get Drew out of the way.

"I got an idea that an autopsy on Drew will reveal another of them automatic bullets. And with all that evidence yuh're sure due to have yore parole changed to a full pardon—or reversal of the sentence—not to speak of the Cattlemen's Association reward for breaking up the thievery."

But Doug Bailey had dropped off to sleep—the first unbroken and peaceful sleep he had got for years.

Watch for More "Wonders of the West" in Coming Issues

Blaze Mallon Rides into Concho on the Prod for Clay Holman—Ready for Six-Gun Battle!

Blaze's smoking guns followed him in his fall

The QUEST

By H. M. SUTHERLAND

Author of "The Devil's Apron," "Blazing Trails," etc.

IT was a hard-bitten crowd of hard-riding *hombres* who graced the long bar in Monte Solvar's *cantina* in that blot on Arizona's 'scutcheon called Concho, and yet it grew strangely silent and wary when a lean-flanked, dusty, steel-eyed rider stood limned in the doorway against the glaring sunshine.

The latter stood immobile save for his eyes, which swiftly searched the face of each man present then, with apparent unconcern, he strode leisurely to the bar.

"Hell's hinges!" rasped the half-whispered voice of someone. "It's Blaze Mallon."

Furtive hands dropped instinctively to gun-belts—the instinct of self-preservation. Each man in that room knew that for years Blaze Mallon had been ceaselessly searching for someone. Whom he sought, and why, they did not know, nor did they presume to make too many enquiries.

Blaze Mallon's affairs were strictly his own. Those two black guns, with their holsters strapped to his thighs, made it so.

Tales of his uncanny accuracy and lightning speed with his six-guns had been recounted from one end of the Border country to the other, exaggerated in the retelling until his name had become a byword. Whereever he rode trouble seemed to dog his trail. Gunmen, and would-be gunmen, sought to add to the glory of their reputation by adding a notch for Blaze Mallon—and failed. And the quest continued remorselessly, ceaselessly.

UNLESS you looked deep into those slate-steel eyes or saw the grim lines settle about his mouth when danger threatened, there was little about him to set him apart from scores of the riders of the border spreads. He could not have been more than thirty and yet there was a tinge of grey at his temples, and there were times when his face froze into immutable granite and his voice rasped like the bite of a file.

As he reached the bar Buck Maddox, marshal of Concho, stepped forward and offered his hand.

"I reckon as how it's no secret that yuh're lookin' fer somebody," he declared with a hint of an apology in his tones as he stroked his drooping, melancholy mustache, "an' I'm hopin' yuh'll find him hyeh. I've got too many danged mavericks on the prod to ride herd on fer the peace o' my own mind. Ef'n yuh'll jest take one er—"

"Have a drink, Marshal," invited Mallon shortly, and the smile on the marshal's face faded instantly.

"Shore, Mallon! Shore!" He drank with unusual gusto.

Blaze Mallon's attention wandered to a table nearby where a game of draw poker was in progress in which Monte Solvar himself was the banker. The latter seemed to be enjoying a phenomenal run of luck for the chips were piled high before him. One of the players with an eloquent shrug arose and left the table, and Mallon slipped into his place.

"Mind if I take a hand?" he asked softly.

Solvar, after a quick glance, nodded in agreement.

The play for a few minutes was uninteresting with but few chips changing hands. When it came Solvar's turn to deal, Blaze slipped lower in his chair and through narrowed eyes watched the gambler's hands. Upon looking at his own hand Blaze saw that he held three jacks and he opened the pot with a blue. The player on his left stayed, and Solvar raised it a blue. The two other players dropped their hands.

"I'll see that an' raise her a hundred," drawled Blaze, pushing a stack across the table.

Twice more the pot was raised, and by that time a small crowd of spectators had gathered about the game.

"Jest a minute, Solvar!" called Blaze softly, leaning back in his chair to give his arms free play. "Before yuh deal the cards, I'm askin' that yuh take off that ring."

Monte Solvar grew rigid and purple blotches appeared on his heavy jowls.

Dead silence reigned; and not one man present failed to grasp the significance of Blaze's words. Solvar was accused of crooked dealings, and

it was entirely up to Solvar to come through. Anger had so congested his face that apoplexy seemed inevitable as he lurched to his feet.

"Why—yuh danged Tehanner!" he growled. "What do yuh mean by that remark?"

"Exactly what I said." Blaze remained immobile, the grim lines about his mouth puckered into a mirthless grin. "Those square facets on that ring have been polished 'til they're like a mirror and yuh can see every card that yuh deal."

Solvar's right hand came up slowly as if to remove the ring from his left, and then with a sudden flick of his forearm a derringer .41 flickered in the light. With that movement echoed the roar of a gun and those who watched to see Blaze Mallon sag to the floor, gasped in amazement when they saw a smoking gun in his hand.

Solvar was staring at his own numbed fingers from which the derringer had been shot away.

"Hell's fire!" gasped Buck Maddox hoarsely. "Now, how did *that* happen?"

Monte Solvar stared for a long ten seconds at the unwavering gun in Blaze's hand, and his face slowly drained to a dead white. With a visible effort he wrenched his eyes away and then turned and left the room. As he vanished a deep sigh escaped the lips of several of the onlookers, and feet shuffled on the floor as the tension relaxed.

AN assistant slipped into Solvar's seat and play was resumed as if no untoward incident had occurred. Blaze sheathed his gun and carefully divided the chips of that unfinished hand. Then for the next hour he won steadily, and as he cashed his chips the roll of horses' hoofs and the staccato rattle of gunfire on the street outside turned all eyes toward the door.

A knot of cowpokes, led by a lanky, sandy-thatched ranny, entered the *cantina*.

"Rope Rogers, straw-boss of the Bar-Dollar spread," explained someone near Blaze as the latter counted his winnings.

Rogers made his way to the bar, took a husky drink, and then turned to Buck Maddox.

"'Lo, Buck" he greeted amiably. "I reckon I've got some news fer yuh."

"Yeah? Bad, o' course."

"Depends on how yuh look at it. Cray Holman is on his way here. Ort to git in sometime about nightfall."

"Cray Holman!" Maddox's eyes slitted and his breath came through clinched teeth. "What's he doin' here?"

"Got a herd o' steers which he's takin' to San Elizario, so he says. I expect he's furnishin' Zaporto's army with beef."

"Thet he stole an' rebranded," declared Maddox guardedly. "Well, much obliged fer yore information, Rope. I'll keep my eyes skinned."

Cray Holman was a name to conjure with from the Gila River south to the Border. One of the most ruthless killers in the history of the state, he was reported to have had three notches on his guns before he was sixteen and eleven when he had reached his majority, but those who knew him best claimed that these figures were largely exaggerated.

Common rumor had it that he was so quick on the draw that the eye could not follow his movements and so accurate that he could split a bullet on a dime turned edgewise at twenty paces.

Even Blaze Mallon grew taut and expectant upon hearing the name of that *hombre* mentioned.

Buck Maddox must have been looking at Blaze at the time, for an

instant later he drew a little nearer.

"If Cray Holman happens to be the man yuh're lookin' fer," he said so low that those nearest could not overhear, "how'd yuh like to meet him in an official capacity?"

Blaze wheeled and through narrowed eyes studied the marshal's earnest face.

"Meanin' what?" he rasped.

"Meanin' that I'll git yuh app'inted marshal o' Concho in my place. I've been aimin' to resign soon's I could find a man to take the job."

"Yuh quittin'?" There was a sarcastic note in Blaze's tones.

"I ain't runnin' frum Cray Holman er no man, ef'n that is what yuh're drivin' at," flared Maddox. "If yuh want the job, say so. It's a hundred a month an' found."

"I might consider it—for a day or so," agreed Blaze after a short, pregnant silence. "I reckon as how it might keep the time from hangin' heavy on a man's hands."

"'Tain't likely yuh'll find it a restcyore." Maddox was relieved. "Still, it ort to be a easy job fer yuh after the way yuh handled Solvar a few minutes ago. One thing though! The fact that Monte's ag'in yuh ain't goin' to help yuh none. Come on! Le's go down to the mayor's office an' git this business done final an' official."

IN a small, dusty room over a feed store on Chisholm Street they faced a rotund little man whose quick bird-like actions were at odd variance with the iciness of his cold blue eyes. He greeted his visitors with a grunt.

"Here's yore new marshal, Jim," announced Buck genially. "I told yuh t'other day that I was quittin' as soon's I could get somebody to take my place. This is Blaze Mallon."

The mayor's half-closed eyes now opened wide, and his jaw dropped.

"The hell yuh warble!" he ejaculated. "*The* Blaze Mallon?"

"If yuh'd 'a' seen him dee-monstratin' hisself down at the *cantina* by shootin' Monte Solvar's derringer outta his hand, yuh wouldn't be askin' that question. After witnessin' that little play, I kinda figgered he might be the man to keep Cray Holman from bustin' Concho apart this evenin'."

"Cray Holman? Comin' here?" The mayor came swiftly to his feet. "Say, ain't Concho gettin' mighty important all of a sudden? Yuh ain't drunk, are yuh, Buck?"

"I'm tellin' yuh facts, Jim." Buck was enjoyin' himself. "Looks kinda like we're headin' fer a little excitement. Anyhow I've brung yuh a new marshal, an' to tell the truth I ain't hankerin' to stop Cray Holman's lead. If yuh call that bein' yaller let it ride. Leastwise I ain't kiddin' myself none whatever."

"Reckon yuh're showin' hoss-sense, Buck," declared the mayor with a shrug. "What's Cray Holman doin' here?"

"Drivin' rustled steers to Zaporto's army," stated Buck bluntly. "Says he's goin' to take Concho apart to see what makes the wheels turn—t'day."

"An' yuh want the job o' stoppin' him?"

The mayor stared incredulously at Blaze.

"I've been lookin' fer that *hombre* fer a long, long time." The ring of steel made Blaze's low tones resonant.

With a deep breath that plainly hinted at relief, Buck removed the silver badge from his shirt and placed it in Blaze's hand.

"An' with this goes a little advice, Mallon," declared the ex-marshal evenly, "which is, put yore trust in Gawd, but keep yore holsters well greased."

Buck's glance rested upon the two

black guns strapped to Blaze's thighs, and he rubbed his chin reflectively.

"I've been wonderin' how yuh git a shot so quick, Mallon," he said thoughtfully. "I take it yuh filed the dawgs an' hammer-fan her. Is that right?"

"Yeah."

Blaze then removed one of the guns and started to let Buck examine it, but the ex-marshal was peering through the open window that overlooked a weed-grown lot. A tin can glinted in the grass some sixty feet distant.

"Le's see if yore gun hand is steady, Blaze," suggested Buck, pointing toward the tin.

Blaze's right hand which still clasped the gun jumped forward and seemingly without aim loosened four bullets in swift succession. At each explosion the can jumped ahead a foot or two—a perfect bit of marksmanship.

A smile was wreathing Buck's face as he turned to Blaze.

"Cray Holman's nigher to hell right now than he ever was before." Buck's eyes lighted with anticipation. "Holman fans his hammer, too, don't he?"

"So I've heard."

There was a world of prophecy in the manner in which he tested his holsters for the draw. A little later they left the room and walked back toward the *cantina*.

An alkali-covered rannie drew rein beside them and grinned down at Buck.

"Marshal," he said mockingly, "I was jest talkin' with Cray Holman. He's bedded his herd down at the Sinkin' Springs, an' he says that he'll come to town in a little while. He thinks mebbe it'd be best if yuh kinda stayed outta his path."

Maddox grinned, and he had an amiable expression on his face.

"Are yuh aimin' to go back to Sinkin' Springs, son?"

"Shore! Soon as I git the dust cut outta my throat some."

"Then tell Cray Holman we're lookin' fer him an' that we've got a reception committee waitin' fer him."

"Right!" The youthful cowpoke's face radiated his joyous anticipation of events to come. Then he spurred his cayuse and vanished in a cloud of dust.

Buck glanced at his watch and then at the sun.

"Three hours 'til sundown," he guessed succinctly. "Gives us plenty o' time."

"Fer what?" Mallon paused.

"To deputize a posse to meet Cray Holman an' his gang when they hit town."

"I'm meetin' Cray Holman alone." There was utter finality in Blaze's tones.

Buck's eyes narrowed as he stared at Blaze.

"Dang it, man!" he gasped. "That's plumb foolish. Cray Holman'll have a dozen gun-slingers with him. Yuh won't have a look-in."

"I'll take that risk. Anyway, I'll see it through 'thout any help whatever."

"But—but—"

"Lissen!" cut in Blaze harshly, his words coming in staccato barks. "I want Cray Holman. It's a matter between us alone. No man sits in this game. Understand?"

"Shore, pardner!" Buck shrugged impotently. "It's yore funeral. But somehow it don't look nowise right to let yuh buck Cray an his gang alone."

THE news of Cray Holman's expected appearance had spread like wildfire through every saloon and honkey-tonk in town, and his name and that of Blaze Mallon were on every lip. When Blaze re-entered the *cantina* he was the center of all eyes and men instinctively stood

apart from him as if they expected the momentary entrance of Cray Holman and the inevitable crash of gunplay.

As he stood before the faro layout watching the play, Mayor Stockner drew him aside.

"Are yuh in earnest about meetin' Holman an' his gang alone?" he asked in a guarded tone.

"I am."

"Then the responsibility is yores, Mallon," he declared with an expressive shrug. "I jest want yuh to know that Concho don't ask it o' yuh."

Blaze rocked on the balls of his feet.

"I've been trailin' Cray Holman fer years, an' once we meet no power kin keep me from killin' him." There was no boastfulness in his tones, only grim determination and utter confidence.

"Keno!" agreed the mayor with a sigh. "I'm respectin' yore wishes but I'm doubtful if yuh can keep all the boys out o' the game if Holman turns loose his wolves."

"Jest tell 'em I said to leave *Holman* to me."

FOR the next two hours Blaze bucked the tiger with such success that the chips were piled high before him. Through it all he alone in that crowd seemed utterly unaware of the approach of that hell-flecked climax. As far as anyone could ascertain, his only maneuver had been to station himself in such a position that he could keep an eye on the front door.

Time dragged interminably. Taut nerves leaped sharply at the explosion of a roistering waddy's six-gun and a stampede seemed imminent. At last Blaze straightened and glanced through the window at the red ball of the sun low on the western horizon. Then cashing his chips he adjusted his two holsters and made his way leisurely to the street.

A deserted thoroughfare greeted him and he frowned in bewilderment. From doorways and windows along his route peered furtive faces, and far behind him came a knot of cowmen who apparently were determined to miss nothing of the drama that was coming.

Despite the mayor's prediction of possible aid it looked as if Concho was going to be strictly neutral. Not an armed man was in sight as Blaze neared the corner of Chisholm Street and Railroad Avenue—a corner known throughout the Border country as Hell's Elbow, and the scene of innumerable bursts of livid gunplay.

Blaze angled to the sidewalk and took up his position under the awning of the Paradise Saloon. His gallery scattered to various points of vantage from which they could view the action in comparative safety. They knew that the next fifteen minutes would see the string played out —to the end—and they stood motionless, watchful.

With his pocket-knife Blaze cut a sliver of wood from the hitching rack and fashioned a tooth-pick, pointing it with extreme care. At the sound of the distant drum of horses feet far down Chisholm Street he closed the blade of the knife and thrust it unhurriedly into his pocket.

Buck Maddox and two other men whom Blaze had seen with him during the afternoon suddenly appeared through the door of the Paradise Saloon.

Each carried a Winchester rifle balanced across the crook of his arm and silently they advanced toward Blaze. The latter wheeled and faced them, his eyes hardening.

"Git back, boys," he said sharply. "This is my party an' yuh ain't invited to sit in. Understand?"

With a shrug of impotence and disappointment Maddox retreated toward the saloon, and the two cowmen

with him followed suit. Then a small cavalcade of horsemen appeared down the street a few hundred paces, some twenty in number and led by a thick-set, barrel-chested, beetling-browed *hombre* who rode a few paces in advance. That he was looking for trouble was evidenced by two heavy guns in hip-holsters and a repeating rifle in a boot at his knee.

The hard-packed dirt resounded with the rumble of thunder as the riders swept up the street toward Hell's Elbow. While they were yet more than a hundred yards distant Blaze detached himself from the post against which he had been leaning and strode easily into the middle of the street.

Apparently this unexpected move on the part of a lone man took Holman and his gunmen by surprise for they slowed their pace and kept their attention centered upon him. They must have feared a trap because they gradually slowed to a halt while a dozen hands dropped furtively to protruding gun-butts.

BLAZE advanced inexorably, unhurriedly, his hands swinging loosely at his sides as if he anticipated no trouble whatever. To all appearances he was not even tensed for the draw, but to those long accustomed to gunplay, it was noticeable that his elbows stood out from his sides an inch or so further than they would have under ordinary circumstances, and he was walking on the balls of his feet.

Buck Maddox in the doorway of the saloon was swearing luridly, admiringly, and a score of men appeared silently out of other hiding places. They had found it impossible to resist the lure of the raw drama that was being enacted in that dust, sun-drenched street. Even in Concho sheer daring of that type was not often seen.

Cray Holman's left hand, still clasping his reins, dropped to the pommel of his saddle while his right was poised talonwise over the butt of one of his guns. Suddenly his eyes widened beneath his bushy brows and his tense form relaxed slightly.

"Blaze Mallon!" he ejaculated harshly. "What the devil are yuh doin' here?"

"Waitin' fer yuh, Holman." Blaze's voice was low and vibrant, carrying with startling distinctness to listeners across the street.

"What's the play, Blaze?" Holman passed a hand across his brow where the sweat glistened. "I reckon I don't understand—"

"I think yuh do, Cray Holman." Blaze's voice crackled in deadly staccato. "I've jest come back from Yucca in Huaipai Mountains, Holman. Does that mean anythin' to yuh?"

Holman stiffened with understanding, his tanned jowls mottled with white, and the blood draining from his sensuous lips. The talon-fingers above the butt of his gun opened and closed twice, and his lips moved but no words came.

"It's been a long trail, Holman," continued Blaze evenly, tonelessly, "but I knew that we'd meet some day. I've waited a long time fer this minute, yuh dirty skunk, an' now it's here." He half-crouched and his every muscle drew as taut as violin strings. "Draw, dang yuh. Draw!" he snarled through clenched teeth.

His eyes never wavered from those of Holman for he was watching for the flash that would herald Holman's strike for his gun. For a tense and endless period it seemed that they were a statue, and then Holman wilted—quit cold—while even his own men gasped in surprise and unbelief. Slowly he brought his right hand forward and rested it atop his left on the pommel.

"Draw, Holman!" repeated Blaze softly. "Draw, or so help me, I'll let holy daylight through yore carcass."

Hell yawned in Holman's face and he knew it. With a furtive glance toward either side of the street, he shrugged exaggeratedly, and turned to his followers.

"It's a trap, boys," he announced with the hint of a quaver in his tones. "We're covered from every side. We'll come ag'in when they ain't got us ambushed."

It was a crude—albeit unsuccessful—move to cover the most ignominious backdown in the history of Concho, and his men either believed him or were anxious to get away from the scene of their leader's exhibition of rank cowardice, for they wheeled their horses and jogged back along the street whence they came.

Holman in their midst was talking and gesticulating to silent listeners.

For an instant Blaze stood immobile, no expression crossing his frozen features. Then he laughed mirthlessly as the crowd surged about him. Without paying any attention to their plaudits he wheeled and walked toward the hotel, his mind seething with unrelated thoughts.

Through it all ran the one certainty and that was that Holman, even though he had shown the white feather, would return. There was no other way to save his face after backing down to a comparatively unknown in that section.

No, the final chapter was yet to be written.

SHORTLY before nine o'clock that evening Blaze was sitting in the lobby of the hotel reading a newspaper when one of the lookouts in Monte Solvar's *cantina* entered and came straight to him. An enigmatical smile played about Blaze's mouth as he came to his feet.

"They want yuh at the *cantina*," hoarsely whispered the lookout. "Some o' them wild-eyed Tehanners are on the prod, an' Solvar's holdin' 'em off till yuh git there."

"All right, son!" agreed Blaze softly. "Let's go up to my room a minute. I want yuh to carry a sawed-off shotgun fer me. I reckon we can manage the boys without much trouble."

The lookout obeyed reluctantly, and when they entered Blaze's room the latter closed the door and then faced the youth with a grin.

"Yuh're a poor liar, son," he said grimly. "Come through! I want the straight truth."

"I've told yuh the truth, Mister."

Something in Blaze's eyes must have stopped him for he grew silent and his hands trembled.

"Come clean!" Blaze's voice was deadly, and it had the desired effect.

Words almost tumbled from the lookout's mouth in his eagerness to tell the story.

"It's a trap, Mallon," he blurted. "Holman an' Solvar an' five of Holman's best gun-slingers are all set fer yuh to show up. Solvar an' Holman are behind the bar which is steel-plated. The others are in the alcoves an' behind the curtains on the variety stage. I didn't want to come here after yuh, Mallon, but they made me."

"All right, son!" Blaze laughed shortly. "Yuh've done yore duty—nobly."

He filled the chambers of his two revolvers with fresh cartridges, and then loaded the double-barreled shotgun which had been sawed off to about twenty inches. He slipped several extra shells into his pockets, his lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

"One more question, son." He paused in his labors. "Mebbe they've

overlooked one bet. Have they got a man on that balcony over the stage?"

"No. No, not up there."

"Plumb careless o' them," remarked Blaze genially. "Just a few more words with yuh, son, an' we're on our way. We're takin' a short-cut through the alley, an' when we git to the *cantina* yuh're goin' in ahead of me—slow-like as if yuh are marchin' before my gun. Yuh keep lookin' over your shoulder as if I'm followin' yuh. Get that straight, son, because I'm goin' to be watchin' yuh from the outside an' one crooked move out o' yuh will be jest too bad. Understand?"

"I gotcha." The eagerness and alacrity with which he acceded to Blaze's orders were in themselves convincing.

"Go ahead, then, an' don't look back till yuh reach the door o' the *cantina*."

At a swift pace they crossed the street and entered an alley that led to a vacant lot beside Solvar's place. Lights blazed from the *cantina* as they drew near and Blaze could not resist the temptation to take a peek inside. He chuckled silently when he saw Monte Solvar holding a gun on a grinning bunch of Tehanners as if he were holding them at bay until Blaze could arrive. He was still chuckling when he and the lookout reached the splash of light that came from the open door.

"NOW, take yore time, son," he whispered, and as the youth started toward the steps, Blaze Mallon slipped silently out toward a shack on the left of the *cantina*. Mounting a pile of barrels and boxes he reached the roof and then darted across another low building that adjoined the *cantina*.

A few silent, cat-footed strides brought him to an open upstairs window which gave him entrance upon the balcony overlooking the saloon. As he slid through that window he saw three cowmen sitting beside the railing engrossed with the scene below.

One of these three saw Blaze coming swiftly toward them, and like shadows they melted out of line of fire. The next instant found Blaze beside the railing, his teeth bared in a grin as he peered down at the dramatic entrance of the lookout who was following Blaze's instructions to the letter.

Cray Holman was standing near the end of the bar, his hands resting lightly on the butts of his guns, and near him crouched Solvar, giving more attention to the approaching lookout than to the supposedly rioting cow punchers. In each of the two alcoves on the opposite side of the room Blaze located a watchful gunman, and he knew that two others were directly beneath him on the stage.

Swiftly Blaze brought his riot-gun to bear on Holman and Solvar, holding himself in readiness to whip it about on those two alcoves if necessity arose. Then he barked out sharply:

"Git 'em up—quick!"

Surprise froze every figure in the room. For at least five seconds no man seemed to have the courage to raise his eyes to the point whence came that deadly command.

"Holman, you an' Solvar put yore hands on the bar—in front o' yuh—quick."

Solvar obeyed instinctively, and Holman was just a fraction of a second behind him. Each turned a blanched and ludicrous face toward the balcony.

"You men in the alcove—King, Nelson, Scarrett—come out with yore hands up. This gun's full o' slugs. Move!"

The trio came out simultaneously, and an instant later the two gun-

men from the stage joined them, all with their hands raised and the fear of God in their eyes. A number of spectators moved hurriedly out of line of fire, their composite gaze upon that sinister figure above them.

Blaze with deliberate movements circled the railing and approached the head of a flight of steps that led down to the stage, his eyes never leaving Holman's face.

"Stand where yuh are, Holman," he ordered. "I'm comin' to you—an' this time you can't run. If yuh move, I'll blast yuh."

He felt his way down those steps and his riot gun never wavered the breadth of a hair from Holman's middle. In utter fascination the killer watched Blaze reach the bottom of the stairway, cross the stage, descend the four steps to the floor of the dance-hall and then come straight toward him.

At any time he could have struck for his guns with at least an even break, for Blaze had seemingly grown careless with that shotgun, but something shackled Holman's arms, and he stood motionless, breathing stertorously, and his eyes glued to the granite face of his Nemesis.

HUGGING the wall so that he could keep an eye on Solvar as well as Holman and his five gunmen, Blaze dropped his shotgun upon the table and then stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt. He slowly surveyed the scene before him.

"Listen to me, Nelson!" he rasped. "You an' King an' the rest o' yuh kin put yore hands down if yuh want. Yuh're not sittin' in this game now. It's mine an' Holman's play—jest the two of us, see? I'm promisin' that he'll git a fair break with his guns, an' I know that's all you boys are askin'."

Two or three of them nodded in agreement to the proposal and in a body they moved over toward the faro layout out of line of fire. Blaze knew that all danger from that source had passed.

"Give yore derringer to the barkeep, Solvar," he ordered shortly. "I don't trust *you*."

As if entranced, Solvar obediently tossed the weapon to a white-aproned statue near him and the latter deftly caught it and thrust it into his pocket. Blaze stood squarely in front of Holman. Through his slitted lips he spoke in a deadly staccato.

"Come out here, yuh yellow-bellied sidewinder, where ever'body kin look at yuh while I tell these *hombres* why I'm goin' to kill yuh."

Slowly Blaze's hands moved out from his belt until they were just over the butts of his guns, and he dropped into a half-crouch as Holman swaggered out from behind the bar.

But that swagger was unnatural and there was a strange intentness in his gaze that bespoke his desperation. The muscles of his bulging neck seemed to be knotted and his hands were spreading claws near his guns.

"Holman, I told yuh today that I'd been visitin' in Yucca." Blaze's tones were low and vibrant, but each word penetrated to the most distant corners of the hall. "Yuh see, Holman, I never was quite satisfied with that tale yuh told about that accident in that mine shaft. I believe that yore story ran somethin' like this:

"You an' Jim Mallon—he was my brother—were diggin' that shaft in search o' the lost lead in the old Bob-Tail Flush mine. Yuh struck color an' you an' Jim planted that last shot o' dynamite. Thirty sticks, wasn't it? Then yuh climbed out an' waited fer Jim to light the fuse.

"When Jim stepped into the bucket yuh started windin' up the

windlass, pullin' Jim out o' the shaft before the explosion. But jest before Jim reached the top o' the shaft the rope broke, an' Jim plunged down on that dynamite jest before it exploded. That was yore tale, wasn't it?"

A DEATHLY stillness gripped the room as if life itself were held in suspension. Cray Holman's face drained white, and great drops of perspiration glistened from his forehead. Twice he tried to speak, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

"It's—it's the truth!" he stammered. "The rope broke—"

"An' yuh sold the mine three days later fer sixty thousand dollars," continued Blaze in the same even, toneless voice. "Yeah, it was lucky fer you that the rope broke an' Jim dropped jest when he did. My only hope is that Jim—was knocked unconscious by the fall." His voice suddenly hardened to the ring of steel.

"But Holman, I made a discovery up at Yucca. That rope was not broken—it was cut with a knife!"

His hands dropped on his gun butts. "Don't move, dang yuh! Don't move a muscle till I git through talkin'. I found that rope where yuh'd tried to burn it, but it didn't burn. The ends of that rope weren't even scorched. One end had a knot in it, an' the other had been cut through five strands. Jim's weight had broken the sixth strand.

"That's all, Holman. If there is a hell it'll be yawnin' fer yuh in jest five seconds. Draw, dang yuh! Make yore break!"

The witnesses to that stark drama saw the men glare into each other's eyes for what seemed an eternity. Poised, every muscle and nerve taut and attuned to instantaneous action, each waited for the other to strike. That etching was burned indelibly upon the memory plates of that room.

A glint of saffron lust flashed into Holman's eyes, a herald of the livid action that broke in that split-second. His hands dropped so fast that few saw the movement. Blaze's two guns were stabbing crimson death into Holman as the latter's guns dragged out of their holsters. Holman rocked back on his heels under the impact of the slugs, and one of his .45s sent a stream of bullets into the floor as he sagged and fell on his face.

Blaze's smoking guns followed him in his fall as if he expected a ruse although he knew where his bullets had gone. Slowly he turned and faced the silent and awe-struck spectators, a grim, mirthless smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

"Anybody got anythin' to say?" he queried softly, and utter silence greeted him.

At last the mayor stepped out of the crowd and offered his hand with a murmured word of congratulation. Into his upturned palm Blaze dropped the marshal's badge, and without a word or backward glance strode through the door and vanished into the night.

Next Month: A Complete Novelette of Six-Gun Action

RANGER'S SHOWDOWN

By WESTMORELAND GRAY

Packed with a Punch on Every Thrilling Page!

Ghost *Town* Ghosts

A Tough Hombre Headed for Oronado—and "No Moss" Myers Didn't Believe He Was Spook Hunting

By JAMES W. EGAN

Author of "Bad Man's Town," etc.

BACON was crisping in the pan, the coffee pot boiling, when the echoing report of a shot startled the ears of "No Moss" Myers. The sound appeared to emanate from farther down the lonely mountain gorge in which he had halted to prepare a noon-hour snack.

Holding the skillet in his left hand, the young man let the right drop to the butt of his own black-stocked six-gun. For a minute or two he listened warily. The shot wasn't repeated.

Myers removed his hand from the black Colt, turned toward his horse with a quizzical expression.

"Now, that's kinda funny, Amble Along," he murmured. "We ain't seen hide ner hair o' a human since yestiddy, and if they ever looked to be a plum' uninhabited country, this is it. Yet guns seldom go off without reason. Mebbe it's a hunter after some mountain turkey."

Amble Along, a large, powerful sorrel stallion, made a low whinnying noise, then returned to his nuz-

"Since you won't sell me the hoss," he sneered, "I'll take 'im!"

zling amid the rocks for what sparse fodder was to be obtained.

"In other words, let's eat, huh?" No Moss lifted the coffee pot from the blaze. "Meanwhile, Amble, we'll keep eyes and ears peeled, case it don't happen to be no ambitious turkey shooter."

However, the frugal meal was over, fire stamped out and Myers ready to travel onward when the stranger popped into sight. Around a bend in the gorge, perhaps a dozen rods distant, lurched his heavy-set figure. Seeing horse and rider, he shouted hoarsely.

NO MOSS awaited his nearer approach, impassive bronzed features hiding a keen curiosity. The newcomer walked with stumbling gait, was puffing and blowing. Sweat bathed his red, coarse visage; the sun beating into the defile was hot. His stiff-brimmed *sombrero* and leather boots seemed new. Awkwardly suspended from his wide shoulders was a packsack.

"What a break!" he panted. "Cowboy, am I glad to see you! Had a hunch I sniffed smoke. And I guess I got here just about in the nick of time!"

"Reckon it was yuh who fired the shot a bit ago, huh?" No Moss queried. "Figured mebbe it was a hunter. Yuh lost?"

"Not lost, but badly stranded!" retorted the big fellow. Myers could see he was one used to dwelling in cities. "My fool horse slipped on the way up the canyon and busted a leg. I had to put a slug in him and start hoofing. Believe me, it's no joke to be on foot in this country, cowboy. My dogs are blistered already, and I ain't walked more than a coupla miles!"

"Hoss broke a leg, did he? That is bad!" No Moss agreed. "I reckon yuh're a right smart walk from civilization. Where yuh headed?"

The burly stranger hesitated perceptibly before answering.

"Oronado." His eyes searched Myers peculiarly. "And I must get there soon as possible. That cursed horse certainly played hell with my plans!"

"Oronado? Yuh mean an old ghost town somewhere north o' here?" No Moss showed surprise. "I hear it's been dead for years."

"I know," curtly. "But that's where I'm heading. How much do you want for your horse?"

The question rather staggered No Moss.

"My hoss ain't for sale, mister," he finally responded.

"I'll give you two hundred dollars cash for him!" barked the other. "That's a lot of dough, cowboy. You can buy two or three horses with that money. I must reach Oronado before dark!"

He fumbled inside a pocket of his dark coat, and produced a fat wallet. From this he extracted a sheaf of crackling new bank notes.

"Put it away, mister," No Moss shook his head. "Amble Along ain't on the market. Even if he was, what'd I do without a hoss? O' course, I'm sorry yuh're in a fix, and I'm willin' to be obligin'. Oney thing I can figure is we ride him double. Yuh'll be a pile o' extra weight; still, mebbe he can carry us both. He's quite a hoss, Amble is."

The big man muttered, sulkily restored the currency to the leather fold. With his left hand he thrust it back within the coat.

What came next caught Myers off guard. That same left hand darted upward and under the right armpit. An automatic pistol flipped forth, levelled on the cowboy's chest. The unexpected southpaw draw was swiftly and neatly managed, No Moss had to admit.

"All right, chump!" sneeringly. "Since you won't sell me the horse,

I'll take him! I'm going to Oronado, alone! Turn around and unbuckle your gun. Then take your stuff off the nag!"

No Moss Myers said nothing. Face grim, he allowed his holstered Colt to slide to the ground. Amble Along was relieved of bed roll and grub sack.

The burly stranger stooped and quickly snatched the black-stocked revolver. He shoved the gun into his waistband.

"Pick up your junk and start stepping!" came the rasped command.

Without a word, No Moss retreated down the gorge. An oddly flinty smile played at the corners of his mouth.

Amble Along's head followed his master, a look which savored of inquiry in the equine's eyes. But the animal stood quietly enough.

The big fellow waited until Myers was a good twenty yards away. Then, returning the automatic to the armpit holster, he hoisted clumsily into the saddle. As he grasped the reins, the tall form of No Moss wheeled. The flinty smile continued to wreathe his sunburned countenance.

ALL at once meek docility departed from the sorrel stallion. Amble Along began to pitch and buck like he was possessed of demons. The man on his back swore horribly as he tried to cope with this heaving, twisting, four-legged chunk of dynamite. Desperately he clutched at the saddlehorn.

A good rider would have had difficulty in retaining his seat, and the heavy-set forkhander was several degrees short of being a good rider. In less than half a minute he was hurtling through the air, to land on the uneven terrain with a stunning crash. His head contacted a small boulder, and he lay like one dead.

Myers, running rapidly, soon was at the side of the prostrate victim. He spoke a few words to the agitated sorrel before kneeling to examine the unconscious man. Amble Along ceased to gyrate.

There was an ugly bump on the fellow's skull, but No Moss didn't believe him seriously injured.

"Yuh're lucky yuh ain't got a broken neck," he said unsympathetically. "Reckon yuh'll be careful whose hoss yuh try to steal next time, mebbe."

The cowboy recovered his Colt, disarmed the other of the automatic. This he flung into a clump of brush close by. He had fastened his belt in place and restored the bedding and grub sack to its original position when the recumbent figure groaned and stirred.

Myers dashed water from a canteen into the coarse visage. The fellow sputtered, sat up groggily. He felt tenderly of the swelling on his cranium.

"Got that hell-bender trained, have you?" he snarled weakly.

"Amble's a right smart hoss, *hombre*," No Moss grinned. "In the four years I've had him, he's learned never to let nobody ride 'less I tell him to. So I just let him handle yuh."

He swung into the saddle, the grin fading.

"Since yuh object to ridin' double, yuh needn't. I hope yuh won't get too many blisters trampin' on to Oronado. Yore gun is somewhere in yonder brushpile. Good afternoon!"

Myers clucked to the sorrel, which started up the gorge.

"Wait! You can't leave me like this!" babbled the heavy-set unknown, groping to unsteady feet.

But No Moss sternly refused to heed. He loped out of sight, with the other shaking an impotent fist and mouthing blasphemy.

Had the fellow been badly hurt, Amble Along's owner would not have abandoned him, despite the attempted horse theft. As things were, Myers

experienced no compunction. The stranger carried a pack. He might find his pistol if he searched diligently. No reason why he shouldn't make Oronado eventually, although it was probable he would have pretty sore feet upon arrival.

"He seemed plum' set on gettin' there," mused the young man. "Funny, Amble! What does a city feller like him want in a town that's dead and buried?"

POSSIBLY an hour later Myers struck an old wagon road, showing signs of neglect. He reined in.

"Reckon this might lead to Oronado. S'pose we push on and take a peek at this ghost burg, Amble? We ain't got nothin' better to do, and it ain't so far out o' our way."

Wherefore No Moss Myers, rolling stone cowboy, turned his sorrel to the northward. At present unemployed, the lack of a job didn't vastly worry him. He had drifted from the Mexican Border to the Canadian prairies and back, the last decade. Christened Jefferson twenty-seven years ago, his roving habits had gained him his sobriquet. Rolling stones are presumed to gather no moss.

Several days previous Jeff Myers had departed from the small cow town of Springer, near the eastern Arizona boundary, with his blankets and a supply of food. It was his intention to journey through the Nutiosita Mountains and essay his luck with some of the cattle ranches in the southern part of the state.

Summer was coming; to eat and sleep outdoors imposed no great hardship. No Moss was free, white and twenty-seven. He had good health, a good horse and a zest for adventure. What else mattered?

For the greater part of the afternoon No Moss rode the lonely, disused highway. The sun was lowering behind the adjacent peaks when he came to the wide pocket in the hills which once upon a time had been a thriving mining camp.

"Welcome to Oronado!" voiced the cowboy as he forked Amble Along into the single main street. "She's a ghost, and no mistake!"

An air of decay hung over the false-fronted frame buildings still standing; the rotting sidewalks. No Moss passed a windowless edifice of sunbaked brick, in marked contrast to its wooden neighbors. A faded inscription conveyed it was the "Bank of Oronado."

Some rods further, across the dusty street, was a ramshackle, two-story structure. The roof had caved in here and there, yet it otherwise was in a fair state of preservation.

"That must'a been a hotel," guessed No Moss. "Mebbe we oughta stop and register for the night, Amble."

He commenced a chuckle which died in his throat. Suddenly and surprisingly, a figure had emerged from the precincts of the timeworn hostelry. A most disreputable, scarecrowish sort of figure, nevertheless unquestionably human.

"Well, I'll be rawhided!" escaped the cowboy. "Is it the landlord or his ghost, Amble?"

He pulled up his mount. The apparition hobbled toward them. His age was advanced, anywhere between fifty and seventy, perhaps. He had long, matted hair and whiskers. And, No Moss observed with a bit of shock, the left eye was a vacant socket, adding to a somewhat repulsive aspect. He noted, likewise, the old-timer packed a revolver on his hip.

"Howdy, Pop!" No Moss greeted.

"Hey?" The ancient cupped a hand to his ear, while his one good orb surveyed Myers with watery brightness. "My hearin' ain't what it usta be, but I figgered I heard a hoss. Don't git many visitors up this way—it's purty lonesome."

"Uh huh." No Moss raised his voice. "Yuh live here all by yoreself, Pop?"

"Sure." The other nodded. "I kin remember when Oronado was right boomin', but she's been dead for nigh onter thutty year. They's oney me left—me and the ghosts!"

"What ghosts?" The manner in which the word was accented aroused the cowboy's curiosity.

"Spirruts o' the dead, young feller!" The hermit cackled queerly. "This town seen killin's in the ole days. Mebbe it's the ghosts o' murdered men prowlin' after dark—I dunno. Mighty skeery to some folks, I reckon. But I don't let no spooks bother me!"

"Ever met up with any, Pop?" No Moss demanded, smiling.

He decided the ancient was a trifle cracked.

"Figger I'm batty, hey?" with a hint of rancor. "Jes' the samey, I done seen and heard things at night—and me with one eye and half-deef, to boot. It's spooky here at night, I tell yuh!"

"Why do yuh stay then, Pop?" still smiling.

"'Cause I ain't got nowheres else to go, young feller, and I kin grub out a livin'. Besides, the spooks is used to me, I reckon. It's strangers they dislike. Last visitor I had, 'bout a month back, slept in the hotel 'long with me. Woke me up in the middle o' the night, yellin' bloody murder.

"He done swore he seen spirruts floatin' in the air and done felt clammy fingers 'round his neck. He set up the rest o' the night and lit out at the peep o' dawn. Ain't ever been back, neether!"

"Well, I ain't afraid o' ghosts, Pop!" No Moss clipped. "I've a notion to spend a night here and mebbe get acquainted with 'em!"

The scarecrow's single optic stared into the younger man's visage, whether or not with hostility No Moss was uncertain.

"Where yuh from, young feller?" the hermit asked abruptly.

"I'm a roamin' rimmy, Pop. Got canned at the Bar X Breeching beyond Springer the other day, and I'm on my way south to the Border. The brand's Jeff Myers. What's yores?"

"My name's Gid Salters." The ragged ancient pawed his beard. "Down in Cliffville, where I buy grub and tobacker ever' so offen, they calls me the mayor o' Oronado. Ain't much left to be mayor uv, is they, Myers?" He laughed in cackling fashion.

"Pleased to meet yuh, Mayor Salters." No Moss dropped lightly to earth. "Have I yore Honor's permission to bed down in yore spooky city for the night?"

"I ain't got no objections—I dunno 'bout the spooks. If they has, reckon they'll let yuh know," croaked Gid Salters. "Yuh kin bunk with me in the ole shebang, if yuh like. Got grub, hey?"

"Bacon, beans, flapjack flour, coffee and sugar," cheerfully. "I ain't stocked heavy, but if yuh're runnin' low on any o' them—"

A shake of the unkempt head halted him.

"Jes' provisioned at Cliffville las' week, Myers. They's a stove in rear o' the hotel yuh kin cook on. I was 'bout to git my own supper. Reckon yuh kin jine me."

"Be right with yuh, Mayor, soon's I hitch Amble and feed him a handful o' oats."

SEVERAL minutes later the cowboy toted bedding and grubsack into the tumbledown relic of Oronado's former glory. His gay expression masked a deep inner puzzlement. Odd it was to find the whiskered, one-eyed Salters dwelling amid these rotting ruins in apparent solitude

and prattling of nocturnal spirits. Aside from that item, the old coot seemed rational enough. Could it be this "mayor" of a ghost town whom the burly stranger—Amble Along's recent victim—had been en route to visit? And for what reason?

Following the ancient, No Moss entered the hotel lobby. Yet remaining was a dust-caked, cobwebby desk, a moldering key-rack, even a yellowed, silent wall clock.

"She usta be the Grand Hotel," Salters waved a grimy hand. "Ain't much grand 'bout her now, hey? Come on; I'll show yuh the dinin' room where I bunk. Kitchen's jes' beyond."

The wide room adjoining the lobby was bare, save for a rude couch hugging an outer wall. Already, with approaching dusk, it was in semi-gloom. The floor underfoot was in better condition than that of the lobby and fairly free from dirt. No Moss pitched his bedroll into the cleanest corner.

"So yuh don't have many visitors?" he remarked deliberately. "Mebbe yuh'll have another 'for the evenin's over—pervided his feet don't quit on him."

"Hey?" Gid Salters twisted his head.

"I said," in a stronger tone, "that yuh got more company on the way, Mayor. A few hours back I met a *hombre* who acted plumb anxious to reach Oronado. Mebbe yuh'd know him. A big man, left-handed, with a red, coarse face. Prob'ly thirty-five or forty years old, and talks like a city feller."

In the poor light it was impossible to read the old-timer's face, but No Moss could have sworn his single orb glittered.

"I dunno any city fellers," came mumblingly. "Where'd yuh run acrost him, hey?"

"He was on foot," with a reminiscent grin. "Claimed his hoss fell and busted a leg and had to be shot. He tried to buy my sorrel and then grab him by force. Between Amble and me, we fooled the big jasper. And seein' how he'd behaved, I decided if he wanted to get to Oronado so bad he'd have to keep on walkin'."

Gid Salters was silent for a moment.

"What would anybody want in Oronado?" he protested. "They's nothin' here 'cept ghost buildin's and ghosts!"

Nevertheless, No Moss had an idea the ancient was perturbed. The pair went without further speech into the kitchen. A fire burned in a rusty range.

There was a rough table, chairs, a cupboard evidently holding stores. A pot simmered on the antiquated stove.

"Make yourself to home, Myers." Salters picked up a battered pail. "I'll git some fresh water and have a look at my two burros. I keep 'em in a kinda corral behind the ole Las' Chance Saloon."

He hobbled out. No Moss watched him go with a slight frown. For all his show of hospitality, the cowboy wasn't entirely convinced this one-eyed hermit was to be trusted.

AT least five minutes elapsed before No Moss heard returning footfalls. Salters limped in, water sloshing in the pail. He was grumbling beneath his breath.

"Everythin' all right, Mayor?" No Moss quizzed sharply.

"Hey?" The single optic glanced up, blinking. "One o' them durn fool burros was tryin' to run off, as usual!"

Salters set down the pail, lighted a smoky kerosene lamp. Talk languished while the men prepared their meal. The ancient did not attack his victuals with the heartiness manifested by his companion. After they

finished, he stoked a smelly pipe. Myers rolled a cigarette.

"Reckon I'll stroll out front for a spell," he said casually.

Salters trailed him to the street. Darkness had mantled the town. The moonless canopy overhead twinkled with stars.

AT the rickety hitching-rack Amble Along whinnied softly. His young master moved to his side, gave him an affectionate pat. Gid Salters squatted on the hotel doorstep, puffing his malodorous briar.

The place was very still. No Moss trod his cigarette under a boot heel. He experienced an unaccountable feeling of uneasiness. The dead quiet, the black shadows of abandoned structures were somehow eerie. Invisible, sinister presences seemed to be abroad. Had the old codger's mouthings of "spirruts" affected his nerves? He laughed mirthlessly.

"Ghost town ghosts!" he scoffed. "Must be gettin' jittery!"

Salters knocked the dottle from his pipe, yawned.

"Might's well turn in, young feller!" he advised. "Ain't nothin' else to do."

An impulse was strong within No Moss to gather his bedding and sleep in the open. But he decided against it. Better to share the dining hall with Oronado's solitary inhabitant and have him where he could watch him.

Presently they adjourned to the ancient's sleeping quarters. Salters brought his smoky lamp from the kitchen. Myers pulled off his boots, retired into blankets and tarp without further undressing. He made sure his Colt was handy.

"Hope yuh rest good, cowboy, and the spooks leave yuh be!" The older man's weird cackle sounded as he extinguished the light.

The room was dark as a pit. No Moss didn't attempt to woo slumber. Vaguely troubled by an indefinable premonition of evil, he lay awake and vigilant.

Time dragged slowly and uneventfully. From the couch of Salters rumbled apparent snores. Despite himself, drowsiness stole over the cowboy.

Then, suddenly, a board seemed to creak. On the instant, No Moss was alert. He sat up cautiously, strove to pierce the Stygian obscurity. Was it imagination, or did a pair of baleful eyes glare out of the blackness?

He slid the Colt from its holster, raised the weapon grimly.

"Who's there?" he snapped.

No response. Yet a conviction persisted that the eyes had not been a phantasm. The hairs at the nape of No Moss' neck stirred. By an effort of will he steadied his nerves. He thumbed back the gun hammer.

At that precise second an unseen arm coiled about his throat, an arm unmistakably of flesh and blood. Fingers far from ghostly gripped the wrist of his right hand. Muscular reaction jerked the trigger of the Colt. The weapon exploded with a shattering reverberation.

Violently backward the strangling arm yanked No Moss. There was an oath, a rush of feet in the sable gloom. A heavy body hurled upon him. Dimly he heard the croaking tones of Gid Salters calling from across the room.

Pinned in the clutch of one invisible foe, hampered by the weight of another, Myers struggled in futile desperation. Iron talons squeezed his windpipe. Even as his eyes bulged in agony, he was aware these cruel hands were encased in silk gloves or something similar.

His tongue protruded. His brain reeled. Consciousness slipped swiftly away from No Moss Myers.

When he recovered he had a strange sensation of dizziness. His throat was constricted and sore. And he

wasn't long in discovering he had been tightly bound, wrist and ankle. Flat on his back he lay, the musty floor beneath. Starlight penetrated a paneless window several feet away.

No Moss coughed involuntarily. Something moved in the darkness. A faint click sounded. A circle of white light blinded his eyes.

"He's come to; you didn't choke him to death, after all, Pete." The voice was unfamiliar, held a suave quality.

"Yeah, your friend's woke up, Vil." The tones were harsher, also unrecognizable.

THE fettered cowboy began to see more distinctly. The light trained upon him was the beam of a large electric torch. And it cast enough illumination to disclose three figures grouped above him.

Two of these—including the holder of the torch—were garbed in a most amazing fashion. Long black coveralls enveloped them, and were surmounted by hoods of the same hue. Thin black gloves hid their hands. Thus costumed, they blended with the blackness — became veritable phantoms of the night!

The third man, however, wore no such strange disguise. He proved to be the burly individual who had come to grief in his noonday attempt to confiscate Amble Along. He bent over Myers now.

"You'd been wise to stay away from Oronado, meddler!" with a sneer. "It'll take more than a smart horse to save your bacon this time!"

No Moss regarded the big fellow with a calm he didn't entirely feel.

"I bet yore feet ache plum' scand'lous, don't they?"

He was answered by a burst of profanity, a brutal kick in the ribs. Evidently his gibe enraged the man.

One of the hooded pair pulled the man away.

"Don't lose your temper, Vilney; the rough stuff will keep!" It was he of the suave accents. "Let's find out who this lug is, and how much he knows. Suppose you start talking, cowboy!"

That boot in the side had caused Myers to see crimson.

"Suppose yuh all go plumb to the devil!" he retorted hotly.

"Aw, let me give him a good working over!" growled the ponderous Vilney. "My dogs are burning up, and he's to blame! If you and Pete hadn't located me and fetched a horse along—"

"Wait!" Again the hooded speaker intervened, authoritatively. "We ain't certain he came here as a spy. Perhaps he is what he told Gid—a range drifter. In any event, Vilney, the dope you bring forces us to move mighty careful.

"I suggest we forget this lug for the time being and go back to the hotel for a powwow. I guess he'll be safe where he is. What you think, Pete?"

"He won't get loose from the knots I tied, Mac!" asserted the other black-robed figure. "Yeah, I'm in favor o' goin' into a huddle and plannin' a course o' action. He'll keep. Come on, Vil!"

Grumblingly Vilney followed his bizarre associates. Hardly had the three nebulous shapes vanished than No Moss Myers was straining at his roped wrists. It didn't take long to learn "Pete" had done a first-class job. He could do nothing with his bonds.

Forehead beaded with sweat, No Moss desisted from his efforts. Already he had determined he was within the faded brick walls of the Bank of Oronado. His mind grappled with the bewildering events of the last hour. Earlier forebodings had been amply justified. Sinister presences were indeed abroad in the crumbling ghost town.

Yet it was not ghosts with whom

he had to deal. Gid Salters' "spooks" were living persons. No Moss realized the one-eyed ancient must be in league with the vindictive Vilney and the darkly shrouded duo. No doubt they were engaged in some criminal business, with Oronado as base of operations.

Any visitor was unwelcome. And obviously he, No Moss, was suspected of an undue interest in their mysterious activities, whatever the nature of these. His jaunt to Oronado was apt to be fraught with disastrous consequences to one Jefferson Myers.

"Reckon mebbe I headed the wrong way after runnin' afoul o' Mister Vilney," he muttered. "Butted plumb into a nest o' crooks!"

HIS moody reflections were suddenly cut short. From the rear of the bank came a thud, as of an object dropping. No Moss tensed. What could that mean?

Almost with the unexpressed query a human voice sliced through the thick shadows in low-pitched tone.

"Where are you, waddy? Able to talk? Answer quietly."

Myers' pulse quickened. His response was whispered.

"Over here. Who are you?"

"A friend. Never mind anything further now. I'm going to risk a light. Mighty dark in this old jug!"

No Moss twisted his trussed form toward the newcomer. The rays of an electric flash, a bit smaller than the one which recently had dazzled his optics, centered on his face.

He stifled an exclamation of astonishment. The figure creeping in his direction was hooded, clothed in baggy black coveralls. His hands, however, were ungloved.

"Friend, huh?" grunted No Moss. "The jaspers I've met tonight wearin' that funny rig ain't been too friendly. If yuh belong to the same lodge—"

"But I don't, young man!" A grim little chuckle. "I borrowed this plumage to serve my purposes. Can't be beat for prowling in the dark. Let's see what we can do about those ropes."

Myers submitted gratefully while the other fumbled and tugged at his lashings. And his curiosity grew.

"Mind if I fire a question, friend?" he asked, softly. "Yuh say yuh ain't one o' this queer outfit, and yet—"

"Queer outfit is right, waddy!" Another grim chuckle. "Let me put you straight. My name is Ward Buckler. I am employed by Uncle Sam, here on official Government business. You have unwittingly been a great help to me tonight."

"Me?" The cowboy's bafflement was evident.

"Exactly. The big fellow—Vilney—came to Oronado to warn his pals. But I'm certain my presence in town is unknown to any of them. You gave me a swell break by attracting all the attention. I sneaked in unnoticed and was able to pursue my investigations to a highly satisfactory conclusion. I feel I owe you something in return. I happened to be hiding nearby when they lugged you into this place."

He still wrestled with Myers' bonds. "Have you any idea why they made you a prisoner? I gather you are a more or less innocent victim. Perhaps that isn't altogether correct. How about it?"

"I'm a victim, all right," groaned No Moss.

Briefly and rapidly, he sketched what had occurred since the initial encounter with the stranded Vilney. By the time he finished, Buckler had freed him.

"There you are, Myers! After hearing your story, I have no desire to drag you into further trouble. However, I'm ready to close in on these rascals, and they are four to one." The Federal man paused.

"Count me in on the roundup, Buckler!" No Moss sat up, flexed his

stiffened wrists. "If yuh got an extra gun—"

"Unfortunately, I haven't, but—listen!" The other abruptly lifted his hooded head. "I think they are coming back. Lie down and pretend you are as when they left. I'll crawl back in the dark and cover them. Don't make a move until I give the word!"

Hastily No Moss resumed his former position. He heard Buckler slither off in the gloom.

Footfalls echoed outside. The recent captors of the cowboy re-entered the ghostly structure. Soon the big torch again was limning his prone form. He affected to blink, saw Gid Salters had added his scarecrow self to the hooded pair and Vilney.

The burly southpaw's lips parted in a malevolent snarl.

"Now, you meddling—"

He got no further. A spot of light glowed in the rear of the bank. The voice of Ward Buckler barked a brittle command.

"Grab for the roof, you buzzards! I arrest you in the name of the United States Government. Up and at 'em, Myers!"

CAUGHT within the radius of the sudden, unwavering electric beam, stricken by surprise, each member of the oddly assorted quartette stood as though rooted. No Moss scrambled to his feet, shedding lengths of no longer confining rope.

"Take their guns and tie 'em!" ordered Buckler.

A maddened roar broke from Vilney. The big fellow wheeled swiftly, flung at Myers. His wild lunge carried both to the floor.

Simultaneously, Salters crouched, jerked at his revolver. He drew with a speed belying his years.

Flame jetted from Buckler's weapon. The one-eyed ancient had been fast, yet not fast enough. He screeched in pain, the gun spinning from his grasp. That well directed bullet had shattered the knuckles of his right hand.

One of the black-robed men—the iron-fingered Pete—started forward, only to be checked by his companion.

"Don't be a fool!" he hissed. "That lug shoots straight!"

Of all these things No Moss Myers was but dimly cognizant. His attention was otherwise and plentifully occupied. Luckily, he had managed to avoid being pinned under his heavier assailant. He clubbed a fist into Vilney's coarse visage. The big fellow cursed luridly, grappled for him.

Threshing, slugging, panting, they rolled over the musty floor. Blood spurted as hard knuckles smashed yielding flesh. No Moss' left eye was closing from a wicked jab. Crimson dripped from a corner of his mouth. His own blows, too, were doing damage to the foe.

In the savage scuffling they tumbled out of range of the small torch's rays. Momentarily, Myers lost his opponent. He struck forth blindly. By sheer chance he contacted a hard, metallic object. The explanation dawned instantly. Somehow, Vilney had contrived to pull a gun.

Even as he thrust it aside, the pistol exploded. Lethal lead hummed by No Moss. Burning powder illuminated Vilney's face for a split-second. It was murderous.

Still clawing at the automatic with his left hand, No Moss drove a terrific right for the lower part of those distorted features. He felt the punch go home with numbing force. The big fellow quivered, went limp.

A stream of light sprayed Myers. Buckler shouted something.

"I'm all right, Buck!" No Moss sang out. "He's cold!"

The beam shuttled away. Not, however, before the cowboy had spotted the gun near Vilney's insensate bulk, snatched it lovingly. Bruised and gory, he groped back into the circle of light.

"At yore service, Buck!" he pronounced. "That *hombre* plays kinda rough, but he won't cause no more trouble for a spell."

SEVERAL minutes later the battered Vilney and his two black-robed mates had been disarmed and bound securely. His crippled hand rudely bandaged, the ancient Gid Salters likewise was a prisoner.

The burly southpaw, conscious now, was sullenly silent. The single orb of the "mayor" of Oronado glinted venomously

Ward Buckler removed the hoods from the shrouded pair, nodded.

"Pete Alsop and Dave McGinley! Old offenders, both!"

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" husked the no longer suave McGinley. "How did you get hold of that outfit?"

"Mebbe I oughta ask a few questions myself," put in No Moss. "I don't quite savvy this business yet."

"I'll try and explain, Myers." Uncle Sam's representative discarded his own dark headgear, exposing the square-hewn, resolute features of a man in the thirties. "For the benefit of these gentlemen, I'm Ward Buckler, special agent of the Treasury Department. I see Mr. Vilney recognizes me. He should.

"Over there in the corner, Myers, is a trap-door. It's the entrance to an underground chamber in which, among other items, will be found thousands of dollars in crisp new currency. Counterfeit currency. This is the headquarters of a 'queer' outfit, as I told you."

"Yuh mean they been makin' bad money?" No Moss started.

"Precisely. There's a nice batch of equipment under our feet. Pete and Mac ran the plant, with Vilney passing the stuff outside. He's been shadowed for weeks. The other day he got wise to the fact I was on the job. He attempted to give me the slip and warn his pals. I let him believe he'd eluded me, in order to trace him to the factory.

"This one-eyed scalawag here obviously served as a lookout. I doubt if he's deaf as he pretends, and he probably was a good gunman in the old days. Through him supplies were obtained, of course, and it was part of his job to scare off visitors to this rotting burg with his stories of alleged ghosts.

"His two pals enacted the roles of spooks. The black robes and hoods and gloves made it easy for them to flit around in the darkness. They even had an extra set of ghost garments, which I borrowed.

"Upon your arrival in Oronado, Salters peddled his usual weird line. But when you told him of meeting Vilney he must have taken alarm, warned Pete and Mac."

"Sure!" No Moss recollected. "When he went for a pail o' water!"

"The pair immediately set forth to find the big guy. Then they came back and captured you. They weren't certain who or what you were, yet you were highly undesirable. While they were salvaging Vilney and concentrating on you, I was profitably at work. I saw them snatch you and decided to sit in on the game, having gathered my evidence. In the morning they'll be headed for the hoosegow, leaving this town to its real ghosts, if any."

"I reckon their carryin'-ons has been plumb shockin' to spooks with proper self-respect, Buck." No Moss grinned through lacerated lips.

"I shouldn't wonder." Buckler matched the grin. "You better herd along with me tomorrow, Myers. I feel the Government owes you something substantial in the way of thanks; and, anyway, I want you to help me deliver these mock ghosts to justice. I think I can safely promise you payment in a different kind of currency than that below our feet!"

Green Gunman

"Halt!" shouted the sheriff, then fired his six-gun

The Cowtown of Laurel Was on a Hell-for-Leather Manhunt—and the Bark of Gunfire Echoed Menacingly over the Rolling Rangeland!

By SAMUEL TAYLOR

Author of "Crooked Vengeance," "Hot Governments," etc.

FOLLOWING the roar of the six-gun came the sharp clipped command:

"Up high with 'em!"

The guard, rifle across knees, obeyed. The driver pulled up the team and followed suit. The two men's eyes turned to the dense chaparral slope of the arroyo from whence had come the voice.

It sounded again: "I said all o' yuh! Or do yuh want me to take a pot shot into them sacks?"

The pile of empty sacks on the buckboard stirred. A pair of hands stretched upward out of the heap,

followed by the head and shoulders of the concealed guard.

"Down on the ground, you three! Eat dirt! Kneel! Down on yore faces! Now, stay there."

With the three stretched face downward on the sparse dusty grass, a figure emerged from the chaparral of the slope, crossed to the buckboard and dragged the heavy iron-braced box from under the seat, tumbled it to the ground.

"Git up, one o' yuh, an' hold the hosses. The other two stay where yuh are."

The driver got to his feet and went to the team's heads. His eyes showed surprised recognition at sight of the holdup man. The outlaw wore a green neckerchief around the lower part of his face, and concealing his figure was a long green cloak—a color that would fade into the sage easily. The cloak was of silk, that could be wadded into a handful, yet its flowing lines obscured the bandit's figure from recognition.

"Smooth idea, this shiny new padlock," the outlaw grunted. "But there's still the same old fifteen cent hasp. Hold 'em!"

His gun barked, belched twice again before the hasp was torn from the steel-bound oak box. The bandit tossed the nickled padlock onto the buckboard seat.

"Take this to Martineau, with my respects. On yore face again."

The driver prostrated himself by his two companions.

The Green Gunman backed out of sight.

"Keep that position," his voice warned. "Fer a full ten minutes."

Lying on the ground with his face to the dirt, the driver grunted:

"Now, you two men know what to do. Plute, you an' me'll go north an' south, bareback. Phil, you stay here in case he comes or is chased back. An' wrap that nickled padlock in yore handkerchief careful-like, 'cause if he has to, Martineau's swore to fingerprint every man in the valley to find which one is this Green Gunman."

For what seemed an interminable period the three lay prone on the earth. Finally Plute stirred slightly. Receiving no warning he made another wiggle, lay still, then raised and turned his head.

"All right. Hop to it."

The three worked swiftly by the prearranged plan. The guard recovered his carbine from the buckboard and while the other two unhitched the team, he slipped the cartridge from the chamber of the gun, holding the feed with his thumb, and slid in its place a long blank.

He shot into the air, and when some eight hundred feet high the detonating cartridge exploded with a loud bang that carried for miles in the dry air. With the explosion came a white puff of smoke. Four times he shot.

REACTION to the signal shot came from five quarters:

Martineau whipped out an oath. The tall owner of the Lazy Lady mine stiffened at the shot, then searched the clear sky for the telltale puff of smoke.

"Ike! Ed!" He cupped hands around his mouth and bellowed into the mine shaft. "Ike! Ed! The shipment's been robbed ag'in!"

As the donkey engine hoisted the bucket up the crude shaft, Martineau clenched his long bony hands.

"That fat-headed sheriff'll never find the trail fer a week, let alone git the Green Gunman. If there's any capturin' to be done, I'll have to do it."

Three horses were saddled and ready in the stable beside the mine. Martineau and his two men raced down the trail in the direction from which had come the warning shots.

"There she is!"

The three deputies around the table laid down their cards and ran outside, followed by the men lounging in the saloon.

"There she goes again. See the smoke?"

"All right. Come on, boys! We'll prob'ly meet the sheriff. He's out scoutin' 'round on his own hook a spell."

Within three minutes nothing but a receding dust cloud was remaining to tell the town of Laurel that a posse was on the man-hunt for the notorious Green Gunman.

The shambling figure of old "Loony Jay" Jenkins stiffened with the pick half raised. He hobbled to the mouth of his tunnel and squinted at the tiny white puffs made when the detonating cartridges exploded in the air.

Loony Jay nodded in satisfaction, then tossed his pick aside and shambled to a lean-to where he kept his burro.

"Good news, Jennie. We're goin' tuh town."

AT the first shot the racing green-clad figure had turned in the saddle and smiled.

"They stayed on their faces plenty long. Got 'em pretty scared, I reckon."

As he rode he removed the green silk cloak. He rolled it, together with the neckerchief, in a small tight bundle. His mount was running toward a low range of flat-topped hills in the rolling country, and as the rider neared the high table-lands he headed for a dry creek bed leading up a small canyon. He followed this around the shoulder of the first hill, then dismounted and crawled through the stunted sage until he could survey the back trail.

His eyes searched each bush and rock, and fastened in attention at the swish of a horse's tail above a large boulder. Then the bandit caught a glimpse of yellow neckerchief and white shirt behind a stunted bush growing atop the boulder in a crevice.

The Green Gunman laid a hand on the butt of his revolver, then drew it away and shook his head.

"Better not take a chance. Might look suspicious. An' he'll get his'n, all right."

He edged back to his horse and spurred up the ravine.

The young man wearing a yellow neckerchief and white shirt reined his horse abruptly at the sound of hard-thudding hoofs, then he spurred his mount behind a small clump of cedar.

There appeared a green-cloaked figure riding hard over a small knoll.

As the Green Gunman approached swiftly, the young man drew his revolver and bore down a bead centering the chest. The gun followed the moving target, and as it came abreast the finger tensed on the trigger, then slowly relaxed before the hammer snapped. The concealed man shook his head, holstered the weapon, and after giving the outlaw a lead, took up the trail.

Shortly, the young man sensed that the Gunman's objective was the flat-topped hills. With the realization, the pursuer dug spurs into his mount and followed a parallel ravine out of sight. He was crouched behind a large boulder near the dry creek bed as the bandit, with green cloak and neckerchief rolled in a tight wad in his hand, trotted out of sight up the sandy trail into a small canyon. The young man waited some five minutes, then followed.

On his mouth was something of a cynical smirk. For although the young stranger had been in the town of Laurel but a day and a half, he had recognized the Green Gunman when the outlaw had removed the cloak. The outlaw, terror of Laurel

Valley, was the sheriff, Tom Waid.

The galloping members of the posse reined as the sheriff rode into view. Sheriff Waid rapidly galloped the distance separating himself from the posse, and assumed command.

"Where yuh boys covered?"

"From Laurel to the robbed buckboard, then this far back."

"Wouldn't put it past that old fossil of a Martineau to stage a fake holdup jest because it's his last chance to git even with me."

"It's a gilt-edge holdup, all right," affirmed a deputy. "'Bout six thousan' in dust."

The sheriff whistled. "Well, I told the old fool to take extra precautions."

He stood in stirrups and surveyed the rolling, sage-and-chaparral-grown country.

"I've covered the country purty much west o' here, an' then Martineau was to have the boys ready to start from his mine in the east. You boys come from the south, so that leaves one chance for the Green Gunman, if he ain't slipped through —north. C'mon, men. Think mebbe I ketched a glimpse of hoof-dust headin' for them flat-topped hills."

As the posse followed, one of the cowboy volunteers grinned at a regular deputy.

"Waid's kinda sore, havin' all this trouble today. With the new sheriff due to swear in t'morrow noon an' all, it's kinda tough luck havin' this happen on the last day."

"Dry up," snapped the deputy. "Don't shoot off yore haid so much, or maybe some day yuh'll find yoreself outta ammunition!"

The cowboy continued to smile, enjoying the situation. He had touched a sore spot in the famous feud between the long lank mining man, Martineau, and the sheriff. The animosity between the pair was of long standing, and it had become increasingly bitter as the Green Gunman roamed the range and took whatever he wished apparently at will, slipping through traps and posse and never having his identity discovered.

Martineau blamed Sheriff Waid for not apprehending the gunman, while the sheriff in turn was infuriated by the mining man's continual goading. A climax was reached when the Green Gunman, in attempting to rob a gold shipment from Martineau's Lazy Lady mine, had killed Red Berry in a gun battle.

The tall gaunt figure of the mine owner became a storming fury at Berry's death. He demanded the capture of the Green Gunman, and he publicly cast aspersions on the sheriff's abilities.

Martineau offered three thousand dollars for the capture of the outlaw, and the Cattlemen's Association spotted a like amount, making six thousand on the head of the mysterious rider.

But still cattle disappeared and shipments of the Lazy Lady mine were robbed.

WHEN county elections arrived Martineau was a fanatical worker against Waid for re-election, and mainly because of the mine owner's efforts and money, Ray Hart, a comparative unknown from the far north end of the county, won the election.

Hart was due to arrive and take office Saturday at noon. On Friday Sheriff Waid laid this elaborate trap to catch the Green Gunman in case he should rob the monthly shipment from the Lazy Lady mine.

It was Waid who had arranged for the detonating shells, and the surrounding of the Green Gunman at the signal. But there was one thing Martineau had done on his own hook —from advice from Ray Hart, the sheriff-to-be.

Hart had written a letter to the

mine owner, and as a result there appeared that nickle-plated padlock on the gold-shipment box. Only Martineau and his three trusted men who handled the shipment knew the purpose of that padlock.

Thus Sheriff Waid, disguised in his green cloak and mask, did not know he had left a telltale clue when he handled the lock with bare hands.

THE posse rode swiftly toward the range of flat-topped hills, until, led by Waid, they reached the dry creek bed. They clattered up this, which led in a narrow ravine a twisting course among the steep hillsides.

For perhaps a mile they continued before they rounded a curve and saw outlined against the sky the figure of a man astride a powerful bay horse. He was on the flat top of a hill, and little could be discerned except that he wore a white shirt and brilliant yellow muffler.

"Halt!" shouted the sheriff, then jerked his six-gun and thundered two shots as the rider dug spurs into his mount and disappeared.

"All right, after him, men!"

The sheriff was particular about this young stranger. For he realized that it was he who had been watching from behind that boulder when he, Waid, had gone up the ravine with the green silk cloak and neckerchief still in his hand and the rawhide sacks of gold in his saddlebags.

The sheriff led the way out of the ravine up the steep slope. As they crested the summit they could see the cowboy streaking across the flat tops of the hills.

Then he disappeared over the edge, heading soutward in the direction from which the posse had originally come.

There sounded several shots. When Sheriff Waid reached the edge of the table-land he saw Martineau and his two men chasing after the stranger, shooting as they rode.

The sheriff spurred into a dead run down the hill, emptying his gun as he went. The long-legged mine owner and his men turned at the sound of shots, then reined at the vigorous gestures of the sheriff. The fleeing man in the yellow neckerchief continued at a fast gallop toward the cover of the low brush-covered hills.

"Where yuh gittin' off at, Martineau?" yelled Waid, riding up. "An' who're yuh shootin' at?"

"We heard a couple o' shots, then this here rider streaked down from the table-land," snapped Martineau. Plainly the mere sight of the sheriff was a red flag to him. "So we started in to git him."

"Yuh ain't deputized!" the sheriff barked. "Yuh're takin' a lot on yore hands, shootin' without due authority!"

The long lean face of the mine owner was as grey as his hair with fury.

"Yuh thick-headed fossil! Yuh're savin' yore dignity while the Green Gunman's gettin' farther at every jump! Come on, Ike, Ed!"

"I'll show the bullet-headed ol' fool!" the sheriff choked. "Here! Spread out! You take the right o' this ridge. You bunch the left. You two with me. Haze that outlaw toward town if yuh can't wing 'im. Git that Green Gunman, dead or alive, but fer gosh sake don't let Martineau do the capturing!"

The young man turned his head from his crouched position along the neck of his running horse to see Martineau and Sheriff Waid in hot argument. He grinned, and pulled his reins toward a low hill on the left. He quickly changed courses as one of the robbed buckboard guards, riding bareback, appeared from a ravine and blazed with his rifle.

The fugitive was running now directly toward the town of Laurel. He tried to swing to the left again, but Martineau and his men had by now

anticipated his move and were pounding along that flank. The sheriff and posse were behind, now spreading to the right. There was but one direction to go, straight toward town.

Behind, Sheriff Waid snarled a grim laugh.

"Run yore fool haid off! It's yore last chancet!"

The fugtive was the better mounted, and going in a straight line he outdistanced the posse who had to spread out in a fan shape to keep him from doubling. The young man had pulled out of sight among the rolling brush hills and had rounded into the flat hollow in which nestled the town when there sounded shots from behind.

The sheriff was warning the townspeople. Men in the saloon, keyed up by the situation, rushed out as the stranger thundered up and reined in a swirl of dust.

"Climb yore hosses, gents!" he bluffed. "Spread out! The Green Gunman's foggin' this way ahead o' the posse! Don't let him slip past!"

No one moved.

.Jest a minute," a leather-skinned cowboy drawled. "If he's a-comin' this way why didn't yuh go t' meet him?"

The young man shrugged impatiently. "Does it look like I got on a green cloak! Here"—at this point there sounded six shots in quick succession from the hills beyond—"they're on his tail! They're shootin' it out! You go out left, an'—"

Every man bolted for the hitching-rack and clattered out to get the Green Gunman.

The young stranger walked into the saloon, empty except for the fat barkeep.

He ordered a drink, threw it off, then walked casually outside.

Martineau was elaborately sarcastic.

"Marv'lous organization, Sheriff, marv'lous! I don't see why yuh don't issue insurance policies to bandits, guaranteein' not to bother 'em!"

"Cut it," growled the sheriff.

He was astride his horse, as was the lank mine owner, and both were in the roadway outside the saloon, while the posse searched the town.

"Is it my fault the town's full o' locoed half-wits who'll let the gunman ride in an' send 'em all out the other way lookin' fer daisies?"

A DEPUTY'S cry cut off the mine owner's angry retort.

"We've found his hoss! It's in the livery stable!"

"Then he's still in town," Waid gasped.

"Unless he stole another," supplemented Martineau.

"I've asked," stated the deputy. "Nobody's missed one."

"Careful," warned Martineau with mock reproof. "Yuh'll git fired from the sheriff's force fer showin' brains."

The sheriff ignored the taunt.

"Surround the town an' work toward the center. Enter every house, store, an' basement. Four o' you scour the surroundin' country, in case the Gunman's started goin' it afoot. Beat out every bush an' every corner. *Git 'im!*"

But at the end of two and a half hours the entire band of searchers gazed helplessly at each other inside the saloon. Martineau's acid sarcasm seared the air, while the blustering sheriff frothed.

"A fine situation!" the lank mine owner snarled. "The bandit rides into town an' puts up his horse in the stable an' decides t' stay awhile!"

"See here, Martineau! You didn't catch 'im neither!"

"Since when did private citizens have to hunt down their own criminals? Yuh're way behind the times, Waid. We have guys called sheriffs which attend to that business nowadays." Martineau shook his finger

under Waid's nose. "An' tomorrow there'll be a new man a-wearin' that star o' yourn on his vest—an' he won't let it git rusty!"

"Yuh're sore!" Waid flared. "How do you know this Ray Hart's goin' to do any better? Yuh don't even know the guy, an' neither does nobody in this end of the county. Yuh ring in a stranger fer a sheriff!"

"I know *about* him," shot Martineau. "Ray Hart busted up the Fowler gang in Montana 'fore driftin' down here. But don't worry none about Hart. He'll have the Green Gunman either in the jug or in the ground inside o' two weeks after he takes office tomorrow noon!"

"Huh!" snorted the sheriff. "Mebbe he won't even show up to git swore in office!"

Waid stamped out of the saloon. As he walked toward his office he peered through windows and around corners, looking for signs of the hidden man.

He could not believe the fugitive had left town; yet it was inconceivable he could have eluded the thorough dragnet.

The most plausible explanation was that the stranger had stolen another horse which had not yet been missed.

Sheriff Waid was worried. That stranger knew that the sheriff was the Green Gunman. The young man could not prove anything, but he knew.

As the owner of such information, he was better off dead. Also, with a new sheriff due on the morrow, it would be very convenient to Waid and would save him needless worry if the Green Gunman mystery should be cleared up—nobody would be making accidental discoveries in the future.

Waid entered his office and slammed the door.

"Hello, Sheriff."

The big man whirled, his hand grabbing for his gun. He trained the weapon on the indistinct blur, which, as his eyes became accustomed to the dusky gloom, assumed the shape of the young man with the yellow neckerchief and white shirt. Patent leather boots were on the sheriff's desk.

"Up with 'em!"

The young man pushed his sombrero away from his brow and grinned.

"Why? My guns are on the bookshelf." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

The sheriff cautiously went behind and secured the two six-shooters from the shelf, then asked suspiciously: "What's yore game?"

"I LEARNED long ago, Waid, that the safest place fer an outlaw is jail. So I jest walked in here an' through the back door into the lockup. Both yore cells was unlocked, so I goes in one an' rolls a cigarette while the boys tears the town apart."

The young man sighed.

"I could've grabbed another nag, but there wasn't another hoss in town which would stand up two mile against your posse. Anyhow, I wasn't so particular about tryin'. I know when I'm licked."

The sheriff stiffened.

"What's behind this. Do yuh think yuh've got the goods on me? Well, yuh know how far yore word would go ag'in' mine. An' if yuh so much as make a sign, I'll pot yuh down an' claim yuh was tryin to escape. Now, git back in one o' them cells. I'm lockin' yuh up."

"I wouldn't do that, Sheriff," rebuked the young man. He gazed curiously at the end of Waid's threatening gun.

"Yuh wouldn't, huh? Git into that cell, or this cannon's apt to blow off in my hand!"

(Continued on page 118)

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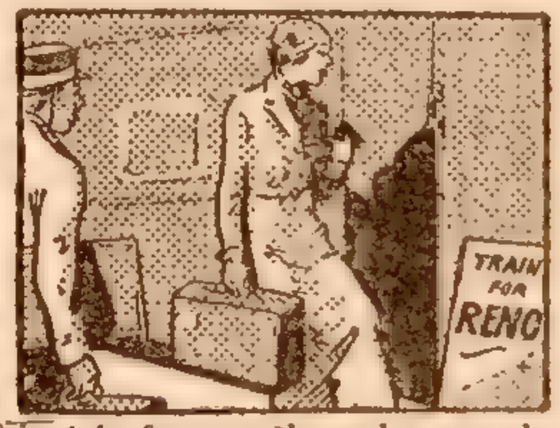

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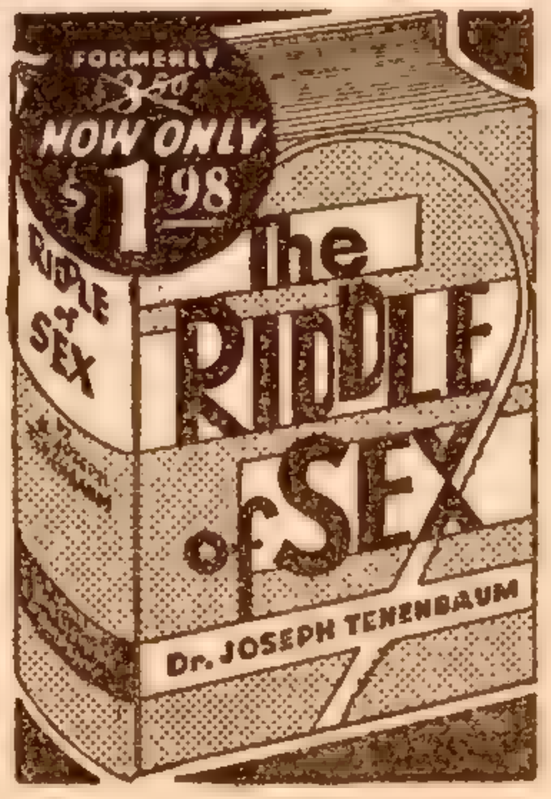

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(Continued from page 116)

The cowboy leaned on the desk, hands cupping chin. He seemed utterly oblivious to the threat of the six-gun under his nose.

"Yuh kin call me Dude," he said. "What's yore nickname, Sheriff?"

"I'll count ten," the sheriff retorted. His voice had leveled, but the quiver of his hands showed his nerves were at a high pitch. "An' I shoot at the ten count."

"Yuh want the six thousand dollars reward fer the Green Gunman, don't yuh?" the young-fellow called Dude asked softly.

Waid checked an impatient gesture. "What d'yuh mean?"

The shoulders below the yellow neckerchief shrugged.

"Think yuh kin collect when Martineau hates yuh like poison? He's only puttin' up half of the six thousand reward, but he's got plenty o' influence with the Cattlemen's Association which is stickin' up the other half."

"What yuh gittin' at?" rasped the big sheriff.

"Yuh know yore law, Sheriff, in spite o' certain other deficiencies in yore makeup. Yuh know that while yuh're sheriff yuh kin take a reward —but yuh can't sue to collect one if the person offerin' it don't want to pay up. That is," insinuated Dude softly, "while yuh're sheriff. Now, a private citizen kin collect a reward, regardless."

The sheriff's gun barrel wavered as he caught the point.

"Tomorrow," the cowboy said, yuh'll go outta office. If nobody knowed yuh had me until tomorrow noon—"

"Then I'd be a private citizen."

"An' yuh'd make six thousand bucks reward money. Six thousand is a lot o' money fer that little bit o' time."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed.

"Wait a minute, Dude—why yuh doin' this? Yuh think yuh kin prove I'm the Green Gunman meanwhile? Yuh ain't got a chance."

"Every man puts off death's long's he kin." Dude shrugged. "Shore I ain't got a Chinaman's chance o' gittin' out o' this. I run away. Everybody knows that. But I'm givin' yuh this tip in return fer the chance."

"Shore," the sheriff nodded. "An' I'm gambler enough to see yore point. I keep yuh here secretly until I go out o' office tomorrow noon. An' by doin' so I kin collect the reward money fer the capture o' the Green Gunman, an' meanwhile yuh'll have whatever chance might come—which won't be nothin'."

"An' the Green Gunman won't be hunted any more," Dude pointed out. "That won't set so hard, huh, Sheriff? No chance o' anything goin' wrong."

THEY sat in silence for a half hour, when:

"I'm thirsty," stated the cowboy.

Waid jerked a thumb at the canteen hanging from a nail on the wall.

"I'd shore like a good shot o' old red-eye."

"Yuh can't have none."

"Don't say that, Sheriff. I only want a couple o' fingers. Or shall I go after it?"

"Yeah! An' leave me here empty handed!"

"All right. You come with me."

"Sit down!" thundered Waid. "I'll git yuh a drink—but it's not because I have to, understand! I want to!"

As the sheriff clumped off up the board sidewalk to the saloon, the Dude stretched luxuriously and grinned.

"This is worth the price," he chuckled. "No matter what it costs."

The sheriff returned, balancing a well-filled glass.

Dude threw off the drink.

"Ahh! An' now fer a good cigarette!"

"I—I chaw. Won't a chaw be jest as good?"

Dude shook his head:

"Don't like to chaw. Never did. An' anyhow, chawin' an' drinkin' don't go together. Nothin' like a good smoke to top off a shot o' red-eye!"

"Mebbe yuh could cut up a little plug an' roll it—"

"I tried that once—breaks the paper. But don't git up, Sheriff! I'll go out fer a sack o' makin's! Yuh jest sit still an' relax!"

"Wait a minute!" The sheriff's voice was a bark. "I've had enough o' this! Now you sit still or I'll drill yuh!"

"Go ahead!" mocked Dude. "Toss six thousand dollars in reward money away fer the price of a sack o' smokin' tobacco! Or yuh could knife me. That wouldn't make any noise."

"Aw, hell," grunted Waid. I'll git yore tobacco!"

Once more the sheriff clumped down the boardwalk toward the saloon. Inside the office, Dude gave vent to convulsive mirth. When Waid had returned, however, the prisoner was composed again.

"Thanks, Sheriff. I'll do somethin' fer you someday."

"Shore yuh will. T'morrow's the day, feller."

The prisoner blew a carefree smoke ring toward the ceiling.

"For nerve," grunted the sheriff in grudging admiration, "yuh've got anythin' beat I ever seen."

The two whiled away the evening playing cards. It was late when there came a furtive knock at the door.

"Inside the jail, Dude! Maybe it's Martineau!"

Dude stretched. "What of it?"

"Git through into them cells! Hurry!"

"Pardon me, Sheriff, but I don't like yore tone. Yuh gotta ask me better than that. Say please."

(Continued on page 122)

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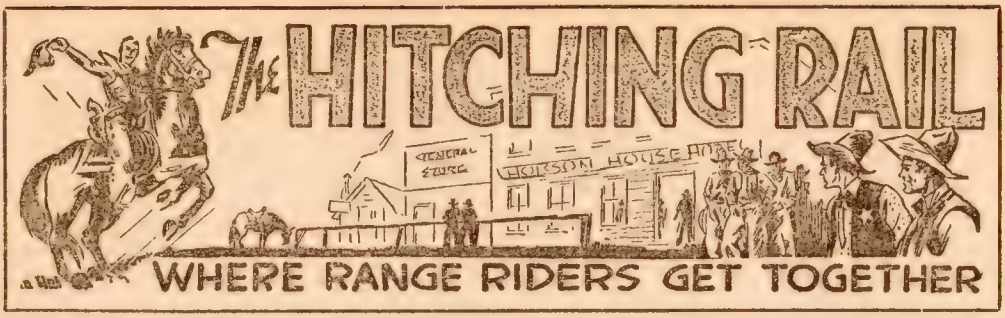

FOLKS, yuh kin drive an ol' cowman like me jest so fur an' no further; an' tauntin' 'im ev'ry day by grins an' sech gits his goat final an' flat. Then he romps up on his high-heeled boots an' goes plumb intuh action, not carin' a gol-durn *peso* what happens.

An' that's jest what's happened tuh me since I writ my say-so last month fer yuh-all tuh read as we sits 'round th' HITCHIN' RAIL an' chews our straws. Yes, suh, I'm shore standin' with my ol' bowed laigs wide apart an' a-glarin'. An' it's all come about 'cause th' boss an' Miss Blondie goes ridin' ev'ry mawnin' on his pinto an' her palamina what Jess Taylor, Dude Chaney, th' Gol-durned Wheel an' others down on our Diamond A presented to 'em last month in remembrance o' th' boss's fine treatment uv 'em when them fellas was all back yere as his guests, like I done told yuh-all about in th' August issue. Remember?

"Adios, Pop!"

Yes, suh, them two goes a-ridin' an' ain't never asked me even one time, an' me wearin' these new El Paso boots an' feelin' my ol' laigs itchin' like all git out. Ain't neither uv 'em offered tuh let me straddle them two broncs nohow. But yuh cain't down a old range waddy thataway. Ev'ry time they been startin' out on them broncs Miss Blondie's been smilin' back at me an' shoutin' "*Adios*, Pop!" an' th' boss grins an' says tuh me afore they trots off, "Happy landin', ol' timer!"

"Pop!" "Happy landin'!" Durn 'em!

So yesterday, come time fer 'em tuh take their durned ride through th' park, I shoves our horned toad, ol' Thriller I told yuh about in our September number, plumb inside th' boss's lunch box, then gits me a check cashed fer twenty plunks. prances over tuh a ridin' academy clost by an' hires me a bronc what hadn't no forelock or mane an' only a durned bobbed tail what looked like a feather duster.

We Starts Ridin'

But th' fella assurred me he war some traveler. Kickin' aside th' flat saddle an' double-reined bridle what he'd rigged that hoss out with, I puts my own single-reined bridle an' my own ol' kak, then me an' that hoss starts a-ridin' straight fer Central Park, where I knowed I'd meet up with th' boss an' Miss Blondie.

An' soon, I seen 'em. They war ridin' along one o' them bridle paths, under th' trees, at a good, spankin' trot, but both uv 'em war doin' that bobbin' up an' down what eastern folks calls "postin'," though they warn't a post in sight 'cept 'round th' swan-an'-duck pool. Knowin' how th' boss allers usta sit straight, supple, usin' cowmen's long stirrups an' th' close seat o' th' range country, I jest stops my bronc—a yaller, moth-eaten son o' Satan what'd been clipped till his hide looked like th' skin uv a seal—an' I felt tears dimmin' my eyes.

My Dander Riz

Th' boss had fallen from his ol'-time puncher seat an' had growed into one o' them parky riders what bobs an' says, whenever they goes out in their durned limousines, "Home, J'imes!" My dander got workin' overtime soon's them first tears had flowed from my orbs. I seen a policeman eyein' me sympathetic-like an' then he crosses tuh me an' says, takin' holt o' my bridle, "Better take it easy, old man. Yore j'ints ain't what they usta be, an' I knows that hoss. He's run away with a lotta people since I been on this beat. Better git down an' lead 'im back tuh wherever yuh hired 'im."

Folks, somethin' inside me riz up spontaneous, yuh might say—th' old fightin' spirit uh th' cow country, whar men is men an' got hair on their chests thicker'n a cow's winter coat afore sheddin' time. "Pop!" "Happy landin'!" an' now this police *hombre* callin' me "Old man" an' advisin' me tuh git down an' lead that hoss home!

I Roars at Him

"Fella!" I roared. "I ain't payin' *you* no alimony tuh ride herd on me. Leggo my bridle!"

I jerks loose my reins from his hand an' shoves home my spurs an' lams that ol' hoss over th' rump with my quirt. Ahaid, I could still see th' boss an' Miss Blondie, ridin' side by side an' a-chattin' quiet-like but still bobbin'. Reckon they war talkin' 'bout what some folks back yere calls "Stance," what seems tuh be used a heap tuh refer tuh a fella's or gal's way o' playin' games accordin' tuh rules.

Madder'n ever when I found my hoss didn't know nuthin' but straight ahaid, I banged 'im 'crost th' neck with my new

(Continued on page 126)

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(Continued from page 119)

"Hurry! They're knockin' ag'in!"

"Say please!"

"All right, please."

Dude went through the back door to the cells, while the sheriff opened the front door. The prisoner pressed his ear against the cell room door and listened.

He heard a senile whine, obviously the voice of an old man, mingle with the low tones of the sheriff for several moments. Then came the thump of the sheriff's boots, and Waid threw open the door.

"Come outta there, yuh crook!"

"Crook?" Dude asked. "Have yuh jest discovered it?"

As he spoke he narrowly eyed the visitor in the sheriff's office. It was an old man, thin and shambling, with a toothless mouth rimmed with tobacco juice.

"Who's yore friend, Sheriff?"

"It's Loony Jay Jenkins, but we're not havin' a social call. I'm askin' yuh a question—where is it?"

"What?"

"The gold which was robbed from the Lazy Lady shipment this afternoon. Yuh followed me closer than I thought, an' took it from my cache."

The sheriff's two guns were out.

"Young 'un," he intoned in a whisper, "the little game we've been playin' is over. Either yuh come clean now or I'll plug yuh like a sieve an' let the devil care about the reward!"

"All right, Sheriff," Dude said. "You win the deal."

A high-pitched chuckle came from the stained lips of the old man.

"I tol' yuh so, Waid! I tol' yuh how tuh handle 'im!"

The moon was riding high, throwing the rolling landscape into sharp black relief. The prisoner followed the road for some time, then struck across country toward the flat-topped hills outlined in the distance. Behind him Sheriff Waid and old Loony Jay Jenkins conversed in

mumbles too low to distinguish words.

THE three riders neared the table-topped hills, and the young man led them up the dry creek bed winding among the rising slopes. After a few minutes Dude reined and dismounted near a fair sized boulder.

"The green cloak an' neckerchief is here."

"All right. An' where's the gold shipment?"

"Really, Sheriff, yuh're using a harsh tone—"

"Cut it!" broke in Waid. "I've took enough o' yore lip, feller! Yuh had me runnin' through hoops in town, but out here keep yore smart mouth to yoreself an' answer questions! Now, where's that gold dust?"

"You go prod somebody else with that shootin' iron!" snapped Dude, showing for the first time a warning note to his voice. "Yuh kill me an' yuh'll git neither the reward *nor* the gold shipment!"

"Give it tuh 'im, Waid!" urged Loony Jay.

"Will yuh or won't yuh?" the sheriff said in a level tone. "Yuh know I can pot yuh an' leave yuh here until tomorrow afternoon, then find yuh. An' I'll at least collect the six thousand reward, even if I do lose the gold shipment."

Dude appraised the two, then shrugged his shoulders, turned and climbed up the slope of the ravine. The sheriff followed, while Loony Jay stayed at the bottom. Fifteen feet up the slope, the young man stopped, scraped loose stones from the base of a larger rock, and extracted the two heavy rawhide sacks. From below Loony Jay gave a delighted whine of pleasure.

"In givin' these to yuh, how do I know it's not the same as shootin' myself?"

Waid, slightly below on the slope and with gun trained, laughed.

(Continued on page 124)

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(Continued from page 123)

"Yuh don't, feller. But it's the same as shootin' yoreself if yuh try to hold out, now."

"Yuh'd shoot me, then?" Dude asked casually. "Over a little gold?"

"Let 'im have it through the stomach, Sheriff!" shrilled Loony Jay from below.

"I was jest wonderin' how far yuh'd go with an innocent man, Waid."

"Shut up on that," growled Waid uncomfortably. Even a hardened criminal has sensibilities.

Dude stood there in the moonlight with a slim, long rawhide sack of gold dust in each hand.

"Are yuh goin' to let that ol' fool shoot me, Sheriff!"

Dude snapped the words out suddenly, and looked at Loony Jay. Waid, off guard, turned to glance downward at the old prospector. Simultaneously, with the movement, Dude swung one of the slender, heavy gold sacks in a swift pendulum-like motion, and threw it directly in Waid's face as the sheriff whirled back.

As he released the poke, the young man dropped to the hillside and flung up a booted toe at the sheriff's gun hand. Waid, overbalanced by the blow, stumbled backwards, and his six-gun roared as the boot-toe smashed against his knuckles. The gun described an arc and clattered on the rocky hillside, while Waid grabbed for his other weapon.

Dude leaped. Loony Jay's gun belched in the moonlight. Dude felt a stinging numbness in his left arm as he sailed through the air. He alighted sprawling among the loose rocks on the slope, and grabbed the gun dropped from the sheriff's hand.

Loony Jay's weapon belched a second time, the lead shooting sparks from a rock near Dude's eyes. The cowboy retaliated with a shot, then as Waid's gun flashed fire Dude, still

sprawled on the slope, rolled downhill and while on his back sent two quick shots, aiming at the gleam of the gun barrel rather than the form of the sheriff.

Waid dropped his gun and clutched a dangling arm with the other hand. Loony Jay had fallen with the first shot. Dude scrambled on his feet, half crouched, eyes alight with the tang of battle.

"Don't stoop fer that gun, Sheriff!"

DUDE grinned. He was sitting in the Laurel saloon, and across the table was the lank mine owner, Martineau.

"But why didn't yuh pot him at first, when yuh saw him with the green cloak an' knowed he was the Green Gunman?" demanded Martineau. "Or especially when you knowed he was the sheriff after he took off his wraps?"

The young man shifted the sling slightly on his bandaged left arm.

"I didn't even have to do that, to catch him—because yuh'd have that shiny padlock with the fingerprints of the robber. But I wanted to git his marketing connections—find out who was passin' his gold fer him."

"Then Loony Jay's mine—"

"Jest a hole in the ground. All he ever got out o' it was what the Green Gunman robbed from you."

The tall mining man shook his head.

"It was an awful risk, bein' chased by that posse."

"But what a swell time I had, makin' the sheriff trot out fer a drink an' a sack o' tobacco fer the prisoner!"

Martineau grinned. "The country's technically without a sheriff until tomorrow noon. Mebbe yuh oughtta swear in tonight, Hart."

Dude—or Ray Hart, sheriff-to-be—shrugged.

"Don't know that legal point. But

(Concluded on page 126)

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(Concluded from page 125)

with the Green Gunman in a cell, I reckon I kin wait. Funny that Waid didn't suspicion who I was."

Martineau's long face chuckled.

"Nobody did. I didn't even know yuh was Ray Hart until yuh proved it to me." The mine owner stopped to indulge in a laugh. "An' we spent all afternoon chasin' the new sheriff!"

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 120)

Stetson an' made a coupla remarks tuh 'im what'd oughta brung 'im down tuh a flat standstill, like uh explosion o' powder under his front feet.

The Race Was On

What I said tuh that bronc musta reached his hearin' an' acted on 'im like coupla quarts o' red-eye. Afore I knowed it, I war flying past th' boss an' Miss Blondie like a bat outa hell an' I heerd 'em yellin' fer me tuh stop, that they was a railroad crossin' just ahaid an' th' eight-forty-nine due to come whizzin' by any minute. Then came th' hard thuds o' their racin' hooves behind me—an' that race war on!

Folks, I've rode a heap o' hosses in my time, but ain't one what was ever borned with a mouth an' jaw as hard as that wall-eyed brute under me. I tugged an' I cussed an' I roared, but might's well 'a' sat quiet an' watched th' scenery flash past. I missed a train by inches, jest in front o' th' engine, an' heard th' boss an' Miss Blondie right clost behind me but unable tuh ketch up with me. Ef I'd hit that engine, wouldn't 'a' been nuthin' left uv it' cept th' sparks, 'cause that durned hoss weighed a good twelve hundred or more pounds an' had a haid like a Hereford bull.

A Streak o' Green

All I saw o' th' countryside was a streak o' green, with now an' then a whizzin', honkin' automobile off tuh th' side o' th' road. After we passed th' Speedway an' reached what somebody yelled at me war High Bridge, I lost track o' distance. Seemed like suthin' watery loomed on my left an' I seen steamers goin' up an' down. Some tooted at me as I went flyin' by, but I didn't have no hand tuh wave back, me a-holdin' them reins like they was sewed tuh my fingers an' both my feet braced forrard ag'in that durned bronc's shoulders. Ef I coulda reached his durned ears with my heels, I'd a-done it. After awhile, still hearin' th' boss an' Miss Blondie comin' along behind, we hit a sorta village an' a fella standin' wide-eyed yelled, "Hello,

Paul Revere! This yere's Tarrytown. Why not stop awhile?"

Afore I could cuss 'im, a durned speckled hen comes stalkin' intuh th' road an' flapped its wings. My bronc sat down so durned fast an' hard that seemed like th' road had caved in. That gimme my chanct an' I stepped from my kak, throwed away them reins an' spoke jest one thing tuh that hoss—an' I ain't repeatin' what I said, folks. I'm a plumb respectable man. Then th' boss an' Miss Blondie comes dashin' up an' eyed me like they expected tuh see a ghost.

One Honest Police Feller!

"Pop!" Miss Blondie cried, throwin' one arm 'round me an' her blue eyes all sorta misty, "are yuh hurt?"

An' th' boss, holdin' me up like he figgered I was gonna faint: "Yuh shore made a happy landin', old-timer!"

Their broncs was drippin' wet. We sent 'em home on th' train, hour later. What became o' that hoss I was ridin' I didn't never know—nor ask. But I believed I'd learned one thing—that they's one honest police fella in New York what gives good advice.

Boss, He Only Laughed

When we walks intuh th' office a few hours later, first thing I seen war our horned toad, Thriller, what was a-sittin' half in an' half out o' th' boss's inkwell, with th' black fluid spilled all over a heap o' them MSS things. I squared that by takin' th' boss an' Miss Blondie out tuh a swell feed. But I reckon some right good Western stories was soiled by Thriller. Boss, he only laughed. Reckon he kin take a joke as well as th' next feller, th' boss kin.

Next time I rides one o' them ridin' academy broncs I'm gonna carry a bale o' alfalfa in one hand, an' when he starts bustin' th' wind straight ahaid, I'll wiggle th' hay out sideways, 'stead o' clawin' on th' reins. Smellin' th' hay, mebbe he'll turn around tuh bite it an' I kin make 'im foller th' way I wants tuh go. An' some parts o' me is shore kinda creaky today. I shore needs th' range country, bad. Th' boss an' Miss Blondie is walkin' 'round easy as ever. Reckon'll come th' day when I'll use that postin' stunt myself. May be suthin' in it, after all.

Now fer Some Letters

Well, I jest had to tell yuh folks. Now fer answerin' some o' these letters. First is from Tod Holton, what lives up in Maine. Howdy, Tod! Bet yo're startin' gittin' snow up thataway, eh? Git out yore heavies, son. I been cold a heap o' times, an' it don't never pay an' ain't none pleasant. Tod wants tuh know a good huntin' ground for real game. Well, Tod, how'd yuh like goin' down tuh Mentone, Texas? Yuh'll meet up with H. J. Johnson an' Johnny Wimberly there, fine boys both, an'

(Continued on page 128)

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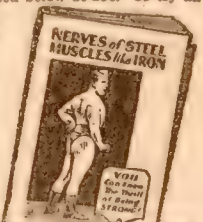

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(Continued from page 127)

they kin shore take yuh places. They killed, jest last month, one eight-foot panther, four grey foxes, twelve ring-tailed wildcats and two lynx on a single trip in th' close-by mountains. That oughta suit yuh. Write to 'em.

The Biggest Cattle Ranch

And yere we have a right fine letter from Miss Kate Aubrey, o' Junction City, Kansas. Thanks fer yore photygraf, Katie—shore lovely. Yuh looks great on that pinto hoss, an' all th' saddle an' bridle trimmin's, too! Katie asks what's th' biggest cattle ranch in th' West. That's hard tuh answer, Katie, but mebbe th' prize'd fall tuh th' King Ranch in Texas. It was established way back in 1853 by Richard King an's said tuh be the largest in th' world. Runs into several Texas counties.

Mrs. Henrietta King, who died in March, 1925, left a will what's jest been settled, which divides th' ranch among a lot o' heirs. The ranch has 2,500,000 acres an' has been valued at 'bout $20,000,000. Ain't that goin' some?

It's a Grand Life

Jimmy Wilson, a shore fine-lookin' young fella, wants to git in an army pack train an' asks how an' where. Jimmy, I been in several, an' it's shore he-man work, but a grand life in th' open an' lotsa hard ridin' an' sech. I'm for yuh, son! They's still a lot o' pack trains in th' army. Down in th' Southwest is th' 5th, 6th an' 7th Pack Trains, located at Fort Ronggold, Texas, Fort Clark, Texas, and at Fort Huachuca, Arizona; and four at Fort Bliss, Texas. All

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An' now I gotta stop. Boss says fer yuh tuh watch out fer next month's GRAND RELAY O' WRITERS, best ever, featurin' MESA OF BRANDED SKULLS, a great complete book-length novel by Grant Taylor; RANGER'S SHOWDOWN, a complete novelette by Westmoreland Gray, and then a string o' stories by Jackson Cole, U. Stanley Aultman, Sam H. Nickels, and others what will make yuh sit up nights an' yowl fer more; an' fer a good hoss under yuh an' wind a-blowin' fine.

An' I'll be seein' yuh ag'in come next month. Hard tuh wait, fer yore letters shore makes me love yuh all. *Adios!*

Buck Benson

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS
ON PAGE 68

1. San Francisco Peak.

2. It extends 2,000 miles. It was used by wild animals long before Indians or white men discovered it.

3. It is from a Sioux word meaning "broad water" or "shallow water" and was the name of a river now known as the Platte. When a territory was formed in that region Secretary of War Wilkins, of President Tyler's cabinet, suggested the name Nebraska.

4. Prescott, Arizona, claims to have held the first public Wild West rodeo nearly fifty years ago.

5. Yucca and sotol plants of the lily family, bearing white blossoms.

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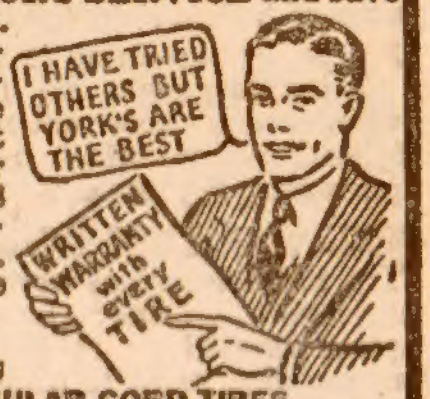

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28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
6.00-16	3.75	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
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34x4	3.25	0.85	35x5	3.95	1.55
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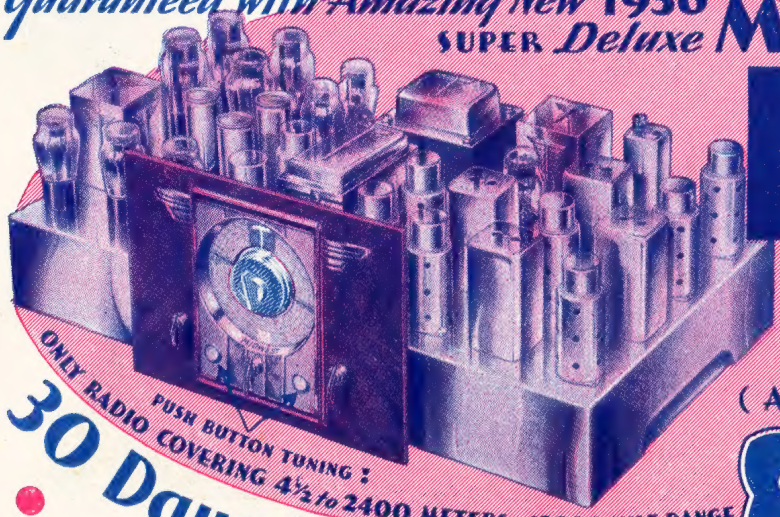

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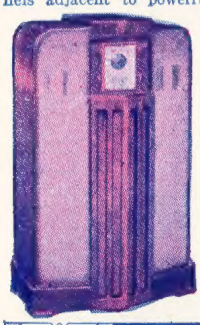

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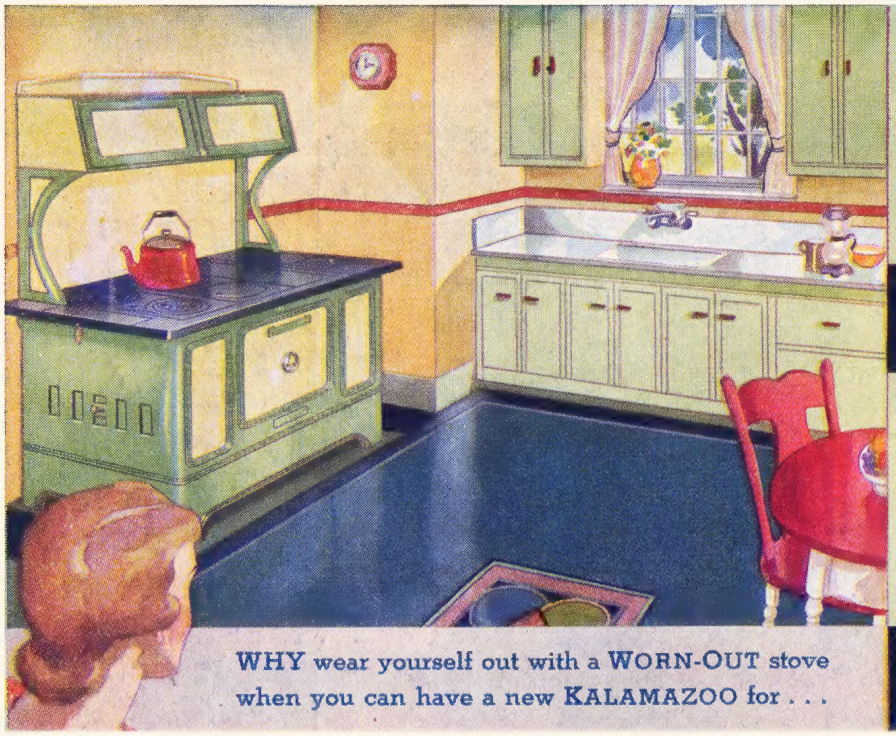

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